

# KING JOHN III OF POLAND AND THE TURKISH ASPECTS OF HIS FOREIGN POLICY \*

ZBIGNIEW WOJCIK

Institute of History. Polish Academy of Sciences. Warsaw.

King John III Sobieski is one of the best known and greatest Polish rulers. The great battle of Vienna in 1683, when united Polish and Austro - German armies under the command-in-chief of Sobieski crushed the Turkish army, brought Poland and especially her king immortal fame. In historical consciousness of the Poles Sobieski is a national hero and at the same time conqueror of the Turks. But a question arises-was he always a foe of Turkey? Let us try to answer this question.

He was like all Polish kings in 16-18th centuries especially after 1572, the year of the extinction of Jagiellonian dynasty, an elective monarch not a hereditary one.

“This prince was descended of a noble and ancient family, the none of the most considerable nor richest in the kingdom” - wrote about his election the aulic physician to him, Irishman Bernard O'Connor, the author of a very valuable and interesting book entitled “The History of Poland” published in London in 1698.

There arises next question - why Sobieski was elected king by Polish gentry and why none of the members of the richer and more powerful Polish aristocratic families like the Radziwills, the Potockis, the Pacs, the Lubomirskis or the Sapiehas? There is only one answer to this question: Sobieski obtained the Polish crown because he was the most eminent military commander and statesman in Poland of that epoch.

The future king of Poland and the national hero was born on August, 17, 1629 to a family of magnates. His father Jakub rose to the highest secular office of the senate of the Polish - Lithuanian Com-

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monwealth, for he was castellan of Cracow i. e. the first lay senator in old Polish parliament. His mother, Zofia Teofila born Danilowicz, was the granddaughter on the distaff side of the grand general (hetman) Żółkiewski, who fell in the battle with the Turks in 1620. His mother's uncle and his brother Marek also died in the conflict with the Turks and Tartars. No wonder that both the young John and his older brother Marek were raised in the chivalrous family tradition and were inculcated with the desire to fight Turks and Tartars.

Later, in 1652, Marek Sobieski was murdered, butchered by Tartars after the bloody battle of Batoh, where he had been captured. He did not fall on the battle-field, but was killed as prisoner of war. I am reminding you of this factum in order that you may understand better Sobieski's psyche and his attitude towards Poland's Muslim neighbours.

Sobieski's political career started with an important event which occurred in 1654. That was his voyage to Turkey as a member of the retinue of the grand envoy of the Commonwealth Mikolaj Bieganowski. During two months he was in Istanbul there, he had the chance to observe at first hand the still mighty but already weakened power of the Ottoman Empire. It may have been there that he made progress in his knowledge of Turkish language which later he spoke pretty well.

The Cossack, Muscovite and Swedish wars which were sweeping over Poland in the middle of the 17th century, broadened Sobieski's military experience. He was able to comfort his book-learning with operations on the battle-fields in Poland, which were the meeting place of various schools and methods of the art of war then in practice. In the years of Swedish war Sobieski allied himself for good and all with the Polish Royal Court, where Queen Louise Marie, a French princess, an ambitious and astute woman came to play an increasingly important role.

In 1660's the collaboration with the Royal Court meant an alliance with the reform group called "the French faction" headed by the Queen. Its purpose was to seat a French candidate on the Polish throne during the lifetime of King John Casimir (in what was called *electio vivente rege*) and, in close relation to this, to strengthen the power of the crown in Poland, for Royal power had begun to lose its importance at a frightening rate. When grand marshall of the

Crown, field general of Polish army Jerzy Lubomirski led the revolt against the reforms planned by the Court, Sobieski found himself in a very difficult situation. He wanted to be loyal to his recent, commander (i. e. Lubomirski), but on the other hand he was closely connected with the policy of Royal Court.

In the Queen's political school he had realized that the reform of Polish political system was absolutely necessary. This idea, this conviction accompanied him almost until his last days.

Finally, after a long hesitation, he declared for Royal camp. I must categorically deny however the opinion of some historians, who considered, that Sobieski had joined at last Court party only because of his love to newly wedded wife, Marie Casimire, foster-child, favourite and former lady-in-waiting of the Queen. No doubt, of course, that Sobieski fell madly in love with Marysienka (diminutive name of Marie Casimire), but at the same time he was a homo politicus and used his own political reason, which finally caused his decision to join the camp of the King and Queen.

Lubomirski's post of grand Crown marshal was offered to Sobieski and he accepted it. He became also the crown field general (hetman polny koronny). Soon afterward, after the civil war had come to its end, the Tartars and the Cossacks under their pro - Turkish hetman Doroshenko started a war with Poland. Sobieski who was then also commander-in-chief of Polish army defeated Cossacks and Tartars during the famous campaign of Podhajce in Podolia. (1667)

In this campaign Sobieski for the first time displayed his great military genius. His triumph helped him recapture the full trust of Polish gentry, which had hated him during Lubomirski's revolt and paved the way to the highest military rank of grand crown general (hetman wielki koronny).

A period of intensive political activity in his lifetime coincided with the reign of the new King Michael Korybut Wiśniowiecki who was elected in the middle of 1669, after King John Casimir's abdication. An ardent supporter of the pro-French faction, Sobieski found himself in opposition to the King, a man of few merits and small intelligence who threw in his lot with so-called Austrian faction. The Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth confronted the danger of the outbreak of a new civil war.

This was not a very glorious period in Sobieski's lifetime. I am making even bold to put a question: was the grand crown general in those days a hero or a traitor?

To my mind Sobieski was in those days not only the most powerful political personage in the Commonwealth, not only the outstanding commander-in chief but also the great Polish statesman. He was in duty bound to defend homeland against the enemies i. e. Tartars and Turks, he defended it excellently, I would say alone at the head of his small army, so, in such a situation he had the right to determine Poland's destiny, her future.

This statesman not only declared himself against his inefficient monarch, not only managed integrally the affairs of the Commonwealth, but at the same time, he was able to work out far-reaching plans of the development of Polish foreign policy. He offered for consideration of two Polish diets (sejm) and namely in spring 1672 and in winter 1673, two variants of its development.

Grand general's memorial sent to the first of above - mentioned diets was not only an excellent survey of the relations between Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire against a background of international situation in Europe, but also a real plan of diplomatic activity, a visionary looking ahead.

Then for the first time, I daresay, Sobieski expressed so unequivocally his great political idea - Poland is not inevitable fated to wage the permanent wars against Turks and Tartars and can look for other solutions more favourable for her, for instance to join them against Russia. Discussing grave international situation of Polish state, he was ready, in spite of his declaring that it would be base, to accept all Turkish peace-conditions for Poland and first of all to resign Ukraine in favour of the Sublime Port.

Reverting to the peace-mediation between Poland and Turkey offered at that time by Crimean Tartars, Sobieski wrote in his memorial: "The khan offers us... the mediation between us and Port. If it was effective, we should accept it. In such a new situation it would be possible to negotiate a treaty with Tartars and Turks and then to use it against Muscovy. This nation (i. e. Muscovites) has disfavoured our people since a long time, has been treacherous and secretly agreeing with our enemies about injuring us. At present,

the Muscovites do not adhere to a treaty concluded with us and sworn by them, although we have given them no rise to such dealing with us. After the league between Poland and Turkey as well as Crimean khanate was concluded we would be able to use both the Cossacks and Tartars for a diversion against Muscovy. As a result of this league we would lose Ukraine, but would resume possession of other territories of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth captured by Muscovy."

Unfortunately, one did not succeed this time in avoiding the war with Turkey. The Ottoman army invaded Poland in 1672 and took the huge frontier stronghold Kamenets. The fierce battle between the two opposing camps in Poland did not subside even then, but torn by internal dissention, the Commonwealth finally ended its strife and buried its differences. An army of 50 thousand soldiers was raised, an incredible number considering the situation.

On November 11, 1673 this army commanded by Sobieski won a brilliant and great victory at Chotin in Moldavia over the select troops headed by Turkish commander Hussein pasha. Sobieski's victory at Chotin may be called a masterpiece of the art of war of that epoch, an opinion fully supported by the high appraisal given by the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), probably the most distinguished military theorist and historian of wars. By the way, Sobieski was the only Polish commander to whom Clausewitz gave his attention.

Sobieski's victory opened his way to the Polish throne, for King Michael died on the eve of the battle of Chotin. The grand general of the crown had attained the highest honour that a Pole, a magnate or a nobleman could aspire to in Poland. He owed it to his splendid victory at Chotin and his fame of the defender of the fatherland (*defensor patriae*).

The early years of the reign of King John III saw, one may say this without exaggeration, the last glamour of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the last gleam of its power and glory. A close scrutiny of the early years of Sobieski's reign makes it clear that his actions were guided by two main aims and namely to strengthen the state internally i. e. by strengthening the power of the royal authority and to make the shift in Poland's foreign policy in order

to improve the country's position on the international arena. Poland's position had been, as you know, very uncertain since the wars with Cossacks, Swedes, Turks, Tartars as well as Russians.

The new King John III realized that without a strong central power he could not hope to reform the Commonwealth. He also bent his efforts to ensure to his eldest son Jakub the succession to the throne. Toward his end he sought to secure a hereditary principality outside of Poland for Jakub and thus to enhance the power of his family and guarantee the throne of Poland to his heirs.

That was not an unrealistic dream. In the war that was then being waged in Western Europe between France and the First European coalition (1674-1679), Brandenburg was in the anti-French camp. Louis XIV of France, the most powerful monarch of Europe, decided to outflank his enemy, the Elector of Brandenburg, Frederic William, by bringing about a Polish-Brandenburgian war in the East.

Louis XIV did not conceal his satisfaction when Sobieski, of whom he thought highly, was elected king of Poland. The mission of winning the Polish King to the idea of an united front with France against the Kurfürst Frederic William was given to the French ambassador to Warsaw, the bishop of Marseille, Msgr Forbin - Janson, who was vigorously seconded by his Swedish colleague in Warsaw, Liliehök.

John III accepted the Franco - Swedish initiative because it coincided quite nearly with his own policy designs and dynastic plans. His cherished dream was to secure for himself or his son East Prussia (now Polish province Mazury) as a hereditary rule. Thus King Sobieski embarked on a new policy which has since gone down in Polish historiography as his Baltic policy.

Its outward expression was to be the Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth setting up a close alliance with France and Sweden against the common enemy of the three i. e. Brandenburg. The Sun-King has assigned to Poland and Sweden the role of diversionary forces which were to attack the Kurfürst's domains from the eastern flank-beginning with Ducal Prussia (later East Prussia).

From our point of view at this juncture it is important that for Sobieski's Baltic policy to succeed it was first necessary to put

an end to the Turkish war and reach a *modus vivendi* with the Ottoman Empire. At any rate, it was a condition put to the Polish King by the French monarch and his diplomats. Louis XIV knew only too well that, unless a peace with Turkey was reached, the Poles had absolutely no chance of taking an offensive action against the Kurfürst in Prussia and, perhaps against the Habsburgs in Hungary. Thus Louis XIV made promised subsidies for the Brandenburgian war conditional on ending the war with Turkey. In the reality a Polish - French alliance was concluded even before a Polish - Turkish armistice agreement was signed.

On June 11 1675, a secret Polish - French treaty, its cutting edge directed against Brandenburg, was signed at Jaworów in Red Ruthenia province. Louis XIV promised financial aid to John III in the latter's contemplated action against Ducal Prussia. What was more and therein lay the main benefit for Poland, Louis XIV promised that in a future treaty with the hostile coalition of Austria-Brandenburg - Holland he would be in favour of Polish King's claim to Prussia.

On October 17 1676, John III's commissioners signed at Żurawno preliminaries to a peace treaty with Turkey and on August, 4, 1677, a secret treaty with Sweden in Gdańsk (Danzig) was signed by the King himself.

Jaworów, Żurawno and Gdańsk were symbolic for the turn in Poland's foreign policy, so characteristic of Sobieski's early period. However, his attempt at capturing East Prussia, be it for the Crown or for his own offspring, came to grief shortly thereafter, owing above all to the inaptness of the late allies - Swedes, whose diversionary action in Ducal Prussia came too late and ended in complete failure.

There was another and perhaps even more reason behind the ill-success of Sobieski's Baltic plans. A powerful and very influential internal opposition wing with the wealthy aristocratic families adeptly exploited and abetted by Brandenburgian and Austrian agents stood in his way. The opposition went so far as to imply that the King might be dethroned if he went ahead with his programme.

On the other hand one should realize that even in the best circumstances Sobieski's Baltic policy could never succeed. The key to the success was in Paris held firmly by the French monarch. This

monarch in 1679 radically changed his inimical position towards the Kurfürst, who, following the pact of Saint Germain-en-Laye, became one of the most trusted friends of Louis XIV. The latter immediately lost all interest in seconding the anti-Brandenburgian designs of the Polish King. Wanting French support the Baltic policy of John III stood no chance of success.

In connection with the lecture I am delivering now, the most important question is the significance of the above-mentioned Baltic policy for the development of Polish-Turkish relations in those days. I have to accentuate it, that in the framework of his new foreign policy King Sobieski wanted to change completely the relations between Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire, to find a *modus vivendi* between two nations. It became especially apparent after the Polish-Turkish armistice at Żurawno had been concluded on October 17, 1676. It is noteworthy that just after cease-fire at Żurawno the crowds of Turkish and Tartar soldiers gathered round the Polish camp, declaring the friendship, brotherhood and starting to trade with Polish soldiers. This manifestation of spontaneous "fraternization" from both sides was, no doubt, very characteristic, as it testified to no-existence of any hatred among the soldiers and from Tartar-Turkish side also to the esteem for valour of their adversaries.

The truce between Poland and Turkey led to a further deterioration in the already unsatisfactory relations between Poland and Russia. The fact coinciding with the outbreak of the Turkish-Russian war, created for the first time in many years not only the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire but even of collaboration and alliance between them, directed, of course, against Russia.

In autumn 1676 papal nuncio in Warsaw Monsignore Martelli sent an alarming report to Rome putting up Holy See to the rapprochement between Poland and Turkey as well as Crimea. The purpose of this rapprochement is, to Martelli's mind, the common Polish-Tartar-Turkish war against Russia. The same Martelli wrote to Rome in April 1678 that King John III is resentful of Russian's behaving towards Poland. In such a situation a Polish-Russian military collaboration against Turkey and Crimean khanate, what the papacy had in view, is out the question.



The King told me - wrote nuncio in his letter of April 18, 1678 "che non potendosi havere l'unione dell'armi coi Moscoviti, sarebbe bisognato pensare all'unione coi Turchi per non havere due inimici cosi potenti."

A combination of the weakness of the Commonwealth and the great power chauvinism of Turkey brought voivode Gniński's mission to Istanbul to naught. Gniński was sent by Sobieski to sultan Mehmed IV soon after the armistice of Żurawno in order to conclude a new Polish - Turkish peace treaty.

All hopes of cooperation with the Sublime Port collapsed like a house of cards almost, and that at the very moment when the Polish King being at odds with Russia was thinking seriously about an alliance with Turkey. The Polish envoy's having been humiliated at Istanbul was a sure blow to the pride of the Poles and once more the Turkish menace became again the number one topic of discussion.

About the wrong behaviour of Turkish leaders towards the Poles and other nations in those days, wrote so outstanding Turkish historian on the turn of 17 th century as Djebedji Hasan Esiri was.

François de la Croix, the secretary of French Embassy in Istanbul, so a man well-disposed to Turkey when writing about the results of Gniński's mission noted, that "enfin il (Gniński) fut obligé de recevoir ces capitulations telles qu'il plût au visir de les luy accorder et dont les formes et les façons de parler ressemblent plustôt à des loix qu'un empereur importe à son vassal, qu'à un traité d'alliance entre deux souverains".

At the same time establishing of peace in Western Europe removed any possibility of realizing Sobieski's Baltic policy. In this situation John III had to abandon the most important features of his original plan concerning his policy towards Turkey.

The question might be asked - now that we know it had from the outset been doomed to failure, what significance did Sobieski's policy really have; did it make any impact on the international position of Poland? Let us start with the second question. Sobieski's early policy up to 1679 reflected his broad political vision, created fine future prospects not only for the House of Sobieski but indeed for the Polish - Lithuanian state, I would say the neo-jagiellonian idea, idea of the great Polish - Lituanian power.

The alliance with France and Sweden reinforced Poland's position vis à vis Brandenburg, Austria and even Russia, it made Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth a looming and very real threat for the aggressive Kurfürst and consequently built up the importance of this country as an European power. From the point of view of European politics at large, the policy of the Polish King between 1675 and 1679 was also significant in that, that it effectively paralyzed Brandenburg's military efforts in its war against Sweden and France.

John III returned to the alliance with the Habsburgs and instead of taking Königsberg and Ducal Prussia from the Hohenzollerns, he set out for Vienna to defend the Habsburgs and the German Reich. At that time Sobieski was called by the Turks a traitor. From formal point of view they were right because the Polish King broke the treaty with Turkey concluded by Gniński in Istanbul in 1678.

The splendid victory of Vienna won in 1683 by the Polish army with the emperor's army reinforced by the German princes, was one of the greatest Polish military triumphs in history. Though the fact that the Polish army and its commander John III, who at the same time was commander-in-chief of all Christian allied forces at the battle of September, 12, 1683, played a decisive role in routing the forces led by Kara Mustafa pasha at Vienna, there were in the past and are in nowadays in some countries the historians, who want to belittle that role. I mean many Austrian and German scholars and recently, first of all, an American researcher Thomas M. Barker, whose book entitled "Double Eagle and Crescent. Vienna's second Turkish siege and its historical setting", published in 1967, though valuable and full of erudition is far from any objectivism.

All of Europe was impressed by the triumph of the Polish King and Polish soldiers. All the monarchs hastened to congratulate and to express their sincere admiration. Sobieski's fame was spread by word of mouth and in writing from the Atlantic Ocean to Russia, from Scotland to the Balkans. Poland became the object of admiration perhaps for the last time before her fall. The King himself wrote to Pope Innocent XI in words fashioned after Julius Caesar's famous lines: "Venimus, vidimus, Deus vicit."

The battle of Vienna brought Poland and her King immortal fame. But what benefits did it bring? Unfortunately the benefits

for the immediate present and for the future were proportionately inverse to the success. Right after Vienna Poland found herself - as it was said by a Polish historian - "under the yoke of the Holy League", an anti-Turkish coalition formed in 1684, and gradually became the tool of Austrian policy, a client rather than a partner equal with the Habsburgs.

Polish armed forces suffered setbacks with growing frequency in the continuing war with the Turks and the victory of Vienna began to pale from year to year and month to month. The shining aureola of the Polish King also began to pale. In 1686 Poland was forced, largely by pressure from the allies of the Holy League, to make concession to Russia and to sign a very unfavourable peace treaty with the state of the tsars.

Now I would like to ask a question - was the resumption of war with Turkey and the relief of Vienna in 1683 a fully justified move from the point of view of Polish policy, was it an essential measure of nation self-defence? Did any other concrete possibilities of a different solution exist?

The harm which the Turkish wars did to Poland in the 17th century is irrefutable. King John III obviously realized the disastrous effects of these wars, when on the morrow of his election he endeavoured to introduce a radical change in Polish foreign policy. Between 1676 and 1678 serious thoughts were given in Poland to the possibility of *modus vivendi* or even alliance with "the Infidel". When in 1677 Sobieski sent voievode of Culm (Chemno) as a grand envoy to Turkey, the instructions he had given him were to obtain assurance of Turkish assistance to Poland in her effort to recover lands lost to Russia in the war 1654-1667 and to assure the sultan of Poland's sincere desire for friendship with Turkey.

For their part, the Turks in 1679 offered to return all lands seized from Poland after the treaty of Buczac (1672) with the exception of Kamenets Podolsk, in return for Poland's breaking off negotiations and truce with Russia. What's more they promised to compensate Poland for the loss of Kamieniec with the part of the provinces they hoped to capture from Russia. Although this Turkish proposal was unconfirmed, the above-mentioned facts provide grounds for the affirmation however, that a possibility of finding a *modus*

vivendi with Turkey and avoiding access to the Holy League really existed and was not merely an unrealistic dream. That no opportunity was taken of this possibility is quite another matter. It was, in great part, Turkey's fault, as I have written above.

The anti-Turkish turn in Sobieski's policy, which took place after 1678-79 meant that Poland's whole effort had to be directed to the inevitable conflict with Ottoman Empire.

This meant abandonment of efforts to consolidate Poland's position on the Baltic and hard necessity to base the country's policy on Russia's good will, which in turn, entailed the necessity of acceding to Russia's demand and ceding a large part of Polish territories in the East to her. This finally established Russia's preponderance over Poland.

If we refute the persistent theory that Turkey was a deadly threat to Poland (I for myself am convinced that Ottoman Empire was incapable of conquering Poland and eliminating her as an independent state), if we carefully examine the Polish - Turkish relations in that period using also the Turkish Archives, we shall be able to provide a conclusive answer to that question, crucial for the Polish policy in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In the meantime rendering all due honour to Sobieski as a great military commander and able politician and statesman, bowing to the heroism of his soldiers at Vienna, we Poles should not remain so deeply convinced that the battle of Vienna was a vital historical necessity for our country. It was rather *malum necessarium*, because Sobieski had no choice.

I can venture a statement that Sobieski was of the same opinion alike. Polish King keenly disappointed in Holy League, thought, shortly after the campaign of Vienna, of retiring from the war and making a separate peace with Turkey. He formulated such an opinion rather clearly in this instruction for regional councils (*sejmiki*) in 1687, putting thereby this problem on the agenda of the session of Polish General Diet (*Sejm Walny*) in 1688.

The internal situation deteriorated at the same rate as Poland's international position. The opposition of the magnates grew in intensity despite the change in the King's foreign policy. They continued to suspect the King of fostering dynastic and absolutist ambitions and spread a pack of slanderous lies about him.

Deeply embittered Sobieski delivered a speech at the senate council session of March 24, 1688, full of accusations against the anarchy of the gentry. In his speech he foretold the downfall of Polish state. This speech has been rightly called his last appeal to the nation.

Stung by failure on the international arena, deeply wounded by the breach with the most of aristocracy and gentry and also partly with his family, the King withdrew into himself, became crotchety and greedy - a greedy old man. He did not live to see the end of the Turkish war in 1699. On June, 17, 1696, John III Sobieski died in pain and suffering in his Wilanów palace near Warsaw. He occupied the Polish throne for 22 years, a period when economic, social and political crises destroyed the organism of the Commonwealth. He was one of Poland's greatest commander and a farsighted and distinguished statesman. His political plans, internal and external, proved that he was fully conscious of and understood all the grave weaknesses of the Polish state and that he sought ways out of the impasse. He encountered unsurmountable obstacles. That does not mean, however, that his policy was based on unrealistic principles.

Sobieski was not a hero cast in bronze. He was not an artificial monolith but a man of flesh and blood, who, though he made mistakes and more than mistakes, was nevertheless a distinguished man. He was not the only eminent statesman in the history of Poland who failed to find understanding and to win the support of his people.

There is a general conviction, I would say even dogma, that in the politics nothing but the final results enter into account. When judging the people of distinction, the politicians and statesmen in Polish history as well as in the history of small nations, I cannot absolutely accept such a criterion. Thus Sobieski was not only a great Polish commander but also an outstanding statesman.

In 1667 during the obsequies of Queen Louise Marie of Poland, one of the bishops, Wydźga, who preached a funeral sermon, said, standing at the queen's coffin: "Et dissipate sunt omnes cogitationes eius" - and all her intentions dissipated.

These words fully refer also to King John III Sobieski.

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