Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to PINYL the second introduction episode. So we’ve sort of set the scene for what I plan to do here and why. We’ve explained that my goal in this podcast is to trace Polish history through the 18th century, with a focus above all on diplomacy, human agency, high politics and sneaky intrigue. At the same time, our mission is to get to the bottom of the key question – did the Poles do it all to themselves, or can we lay more blame at the feet of foreign powers when explaining how the PLC suddenly ceased to exist by 1795. Since we seem inherently incapable of releasing singular introductory episodes these days, you’ll be happy to note that this second introduction episode here does contain some useful information, and it is worthwhile I believe in setting these two episodes apart.

In this introductory episode, we explain our focus for this podcast. We explain the terminology we plan to use and we also explain how we plan on traversing such an eventful, vibrant century as the 18th, without getting distracted. Yes indeed, we have a lot of explaining to do, but I’ll also be providing some detail on the sources I’ll be using, the overall structure of this series and of course the schedule. I don’t want to waste any of your time, so without any further ado, let’s get into this.

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If I had to pinpoint the moment when my interest in Poland began, it would have to begin, unsurprisingly if you know anything about me, in a shop, while I was looking for food. I think I must have been about 12 years old or so at the time, and I came across something which gave me pause for thought. It was when I reached a Polish food section of the supermarket that 12 year old Zack, fed on a diet of WW2 documentaries from the history channel, thought to himself: ‘how did the allies invent Poland?’ It was, obviously, a hideously stupid question, but I wanted to share it with you to show how ignorant I was of actual history at that early stage. To me, Poland was something which had been invented, literally drawn from the ground after not even existing, to block Germany in the aftermath of the FWW. Poland was a punishment invented by the allies during the Treaty of Versailles negotiations, and Poland was then swallowed by Hitler in his first conquest of the Second War.

I knew absolutely nothing about Poland – I knew nothing of the PLC, or its rich history or culture or traditions. I knew nothing about Copernicus’ ground-breaking discoveries, of Sobieski’s slaying outside the walls of Vienna or of the unlikely unification of two very different states in the 14th century. Poland, as I said, was Germany’s punishment, and she was created out of thin air, given a language – I assumed this since I wasn’t told anything different – and then sent on her merry way, before being occupied again by Germany. It was only when I went to my Dad and did the decent thing – asked my hideously stupid question to him – that things began to change. My query as to how the allies managed to invent an ethnicity, a language and a culture all with the aim of bothering Germany was greeted with a puzzled response from my dad, but also much appreciated patience.

Dad explained, in his infinite wisdom, that Poland wasn’t invented by the allies in 1919 – Poland had always been there. To which 12 year old Zack, the expert in these matters since he had watched the WW2 documentaries and you hadn't Dad, replied with a snarky ‘well if it was always there why did it have to be created then?’ My dad didn’t really get where I was going with this line of questioning, and in his defence, he like so many people in the Western world, didn’t really know anything about Poland before it was brought back to life during the Paris Peace Conference. All that he did know was that the allies were not God, and couldn’t create a new nation out of thin air like Adam and Eve.

It was at that point that I latched onto that singularly strange idea. If Poland had always been there, then where was it before the FWW? Again, you must remember I had been fed on a diet of history channel documentaries, so I was completely unaware of the history of occupation and oppression of so much of the Balkans, East-Central Europe and the Baltic etc., but Poland above all always stuck out. It stuck with me for sure, but since the HC wasn’t exactly in the habit of airing documentaries on the PLC, my fascination with Poland was never properly quenched.

A few years later, I started to play ETW, and read several times over the small blurb explaining who each of the great powers are. For those that don’t know, ETW is a RTS game which plonks you in the year 1700, challenges you to take the reins of a given state, and then take over the world. I was utterly fascinated by the era and setting put on display in the game, and it really did compel me to look deeper into it than I previously had thought to do. Naturally I always played as France and invaded Britain, but I was always fascinated by that state in the centre of Europe – the PLC. All that I really took from this version of Poland was that, a case of art imitating life, it was always one of the first powers to be eaten alive by its hungry neighbours. People would go out of their way it seemed to attack and invade Poland. I remember on one occasion the Mughal Empire sailed all the way around the world just to attack the CW and lay siege to Warsaw.

That was an especially weird game, but in any case, my point is, I remained fascinated with Poland, and I wanted to know more. It wasn’t until I started researching wars to cover for WDF in the first year of its existence that this opportunity to know more properly presented itself. It was during that time, back when I covered a single war in a single hour, that I found something weird – the War of the Polish Succession. The WPS proposed as many questions to me as it answered. Here, clearly was a people fighting for its crown in the 1730s. Yet at the same time, there monarchy is elective – that’s a bit weird, and different states are fighting over the crown, that’s odd, and Saxony is a thing, what even is Saxony? The more I looked into it the more I wanted to know more, and the more, at the same time, I was gripped by that burning question – if Poland existed in the 1700s, then where on earth did it go to? Why did it have to be resurrected after the FWW if it had existed before that conflict? When did it stop existing? Why did it stop existing?

To an extent, while I do feel as though I am familiar with the broad stroke of the answers to these questions, PINYL is a my version of an answer to my 12 year old self, and to the teenage Zack who wondered where Poland had come from, and why it was so consistently destroyed during ETW. It is also something of a self-indulgent romp through one of my favourite periods in history – the 18th century. It is also a somewhat one-sided perspective, insofar as, you cannot talk about Poland without talking about Lithuania, since those two entities were bound together by marriage in 1386, and by political union in 1569, but, I am going to focus my attentions on Poland, rather than on Lithuania. This is probably obvious from the title of the podcast, since it’s Poland, rather than Lithuania that isn’t being lost, but still, it deserves reiterating here, in case I’m pulled up on it later. I won’t be ignoring Lithuania, that would be impossible, but I won’t be going into the history of that country with the same passion for detail as I will be with Poland.

Speaking of Poland, it is also worth clarifying here why there are so many different names for Poland running around. The Commonwealth I keep talking about is the shorthand name for the PLC which was created in 1569 when the Poles and Lithuanians bound their two states together. That is an event we’ll be looking into in the introductory episodes we’ve released in Section A called creating a Commonwealth, so we’ll talk more on that then, but you should note that throughout PINYL, I’ll be using the terms Poland, the PLC and simply the CW interchangeably, since all are technically correct. Citizens of the Commonwealth saw themselves as Polish, even if they were Lithuanian, Ruthenian, Prussian etc., in the same way that a Scottish or English or Welch person can be considered British. The designation of Polish didn’t mean ‘from Poland’ in the 18th century, as much as it meant ‘from the CW’, so that’s why I’m able to use it without offending anyone. If anyone is offended, sorry, but you’re going to just have to make like a businessman, and deal.

With that housekeeping related stuffs out of the way, let me talk to you for a sec about a few other related things. A history of PL in the 18th century requires one to have an eye for the right content, for the right things to include and the right things to exclude, for deciding how deep to go when it comes to Poland’s neighbours, and for accepting that I may have got side-tracked while talking about Frederick the Great. This isn’t just because I am a qualified history nerd, it’s also because the cast of characters that existed during the 18th century was impressive on a scale unparalleled, in my view, to any other century. Frederick the Great, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great – one can normally judge the vibrancy of a given century by counting the number of ‘greats’ that inhabit it.

Yet, in our case here, we are forced to step back from simple hero worship or a mere observation of these figure’s deeds and legacies. This is because these three greats all made their fortunes and prestige at Poland’s expense. Each one of their kingdoms benefited immensely from the seizing and harnessing of lands which had not been theirs, and which they had stolen from the Poles. Not only that, but upon reaching their zenith in power, the magnetism of their personalities in full display, the position of the Polish victim in the historiography was adjusted to suit their mystique.

These three great figures had not been predators, preying upon the weakness and confusion of their neighbour; they had not taken advantage of the setbacks of this neighbour to inflate their powers, their legacy, their egos. Instead, P-L itself was to blame. The Commonwealth had been a destabilising influence on the continent; it had sapped the resources and patience of its neighbours by failing to keep a lid on its contagious problems; it engaged in disgusting religious persecution and remained a hotbed of religious intolerance; it had proved itself unable to reform time and time again. Worse than all that though, Poland’s greatest crime of all was that it had the audacity to be weak when its neighbours happened to be strong.

That, as history has shown time and again, was more than enough of a crime to sentence PL and then the Poles themselves to a history of ridicule, resistance and despair. As we’ve already seen from just a few quotations and examples, a great deal of ignorance did exist on the subject of Poland. It was almost as though the perception seemed to be that Poland may have been a victim, but be honest, so say the greats of Europe, she was kinda asking for it. This series provides the firmest argument against this idea, and a major reason why I decided to do it was to right this incorrect perception, which was plainly carried into the 20th century.

I did have another reason, not necessarily for starting, but certainly for persevering with this project. Recently, those keeping abreast of events in Poland in 2018 will have noted a more sinister and unfortunate turn of events, which developed only once I was far into researching this podcast, but which has further compelled me to complete it. It is currently illegal to say or write words expressing the fact that Poland played a role in the Holocaust. This despite the very real, undeniable evidence to the effect that Poles, victims though they undoubtedly were, did, regrettably, play a role in the Holocaust just as all occupied populations did.[[1]](#footnote-1) The actions of Poland’s far-right government could represent the beginning of a worrying trend in Eastern Europe. After having talked with a Holocaust survivor a few months ago, he, a native of Slovakia, was concerned that Poland’s actions would pave the way for other governments in Slovakia, in Hungary, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States and in the Balkans, to adopt similar laws. The best way for people like myself, and Tomi Reichental, the aforementioned Holocaust survivor, to fight these delusional laws, is to present the truth.

If you were to travel to Poland today and violate this law, you could spend as much as three years in prison. This law is denial. There is no other way to put it other than to state that the law violates historical memory and it covers up the truth. It not only sweeps under the carpet the terrible cruelties and tragedies inflicted upon Poland’s rooted Jewish population, an immensely distasteful tactic, it also absolves Poland’s wartime government of any crimes committed in the name of the Nazis. In addition to this, it paints a dark picture today of the calibre of Polish statesmen in the 21st century; that they are so willing to cover up their nation’s painful history, and that Polish citizens are evidently so willing to listen to this distortion, often with a tragically misplaced enthusiasm.

When I first learned of this law being passed, I was so disgusted that I found it immensely difficult to return to researching this series at all. Every time I looked at Poland in history, all I could see was this nonsense law. Yet, after a small break, I persevered, for one reason above all. I don’t want people living in our world today to think that there’s nothing more to Poland than a government which lives in denial of its past. Instead, I want people to know that before this third republic of the modern day, and before the second republic of the inter-war years, there was one republic – there was a *commonwealth*, and that this commonwealth deserves attention and notoriety for its achievements, its progress and its tolerance. In February 2018, Poland's senate leader appealed to Poles living abroad to report to the authorities any statements deemed to hurt "Poland's good name".[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s fairly safe to say that this ‘good name’ has taken a hard knock already with this ahistorical and deeply insulting law. A year later, and it has become increasingly clear that Poland’s government is seeking to take the liberal out of democracy, by effectively controlling the free press and monopolising the debate with state TV. If something is not done within the next few years, then Poland could sink into a hole of self-denial and national despair all of its own making, and I want to stop that.

In a multi-national and multi-religious state such as the commonwealth was, its foundations were never so strong than when it learned to co-opt its different elements, rather than persecute them. These qualities, when Europe was forcing people to choose between loyalty to the state or their God, resulted in an explosion of immigration to the PLC. Before long, the commonwealth boasted the largest population of Jews in Europe, and the industriousness of these people, when all the other parts were working correctly, enabled the PLC to endure a kind of Golden Age of learning, scientific discovery and advancement over the 16th and early 17th centuries.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was the culmination of republican ideals, of ideas about the rights of man and of fledgling notions of democracy. If it was the culmination, then it was also the peak of the Commonwealth’s performance. The 17th century was to be a century of incessant warfare, disruption and devastation for Poland, in which one of the sole shining lights was to be Jan Sobieski’s leadership, and appearance outside the walls of Vienna in 1683.

The damage inflicted upon the CW in the 17th century was capitalised upon by its much stronger neighbours in the 18th century. With the damage done, the Commonwealth’s officials were discovering that devices and concepts which had worked so well in the past no longer functioned as they used to. The Commonwealth’s learning institutions had become stagnant, while its armed forces became less professional, its agriculture less productive, and its nobles more selfish. At the same time, almost as a reaction to these woes, Commonwealth society became less tolerant and accepting, far less economically stable and, ultimately, a great deal more vulnerable. In the latter 18th century, unable to defend itself, its neighbours in Austria, Russia and Prussia picked the commonwealth apart, so that by 1795, there was nothing left. This, indeed, is the short version of the history of the PLC, but as you can probably tell, we’re here for the longer version.

Aside from several introductory episodes – on the CW’s nobility, on where the a polity as curiously unique as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth came from, and on a somewhat brief recounting of the state’s history up to 1700 – we will be proceeding with a chronological approach to the subject from episode 1. This means that there will naturally be an end to this podcast at some stage, but at the same time, on the question of whether I will ever cover the 19th and 20th centuries under the same formula, I would say never say never. Depending on the kind of response this series gets and how busy I am, I would always be interested in telling the story of Poland to an audience that is willing to listen. While we’re on the subject of structure for this podcast series though, I should add that I intend for this series to be 100 episodes in length. At time of recording, I have the first 40 episodes written, and we’re up to the year 1750, so there is a good chance that we will make this happen, but at the same time, if you know me and my tendency to underestimate things, then you shouldn’t be holding your breath. It was because we had this work in the bank that I felt POL was a safe bet to release to Patrons, as I dug into my PhD.

To shape a narrative which gives appropriate attention to both the PLC and her neighbours will not be an easy task though; we’ll be in need of some quality sources to get us through. One of the books which stood out for just such a task was Richard Butterwick’s *Poland-Lithuania in European Context 1500-1795*, since that sounds almost exactly like what we’re trying to do here…but it was $175 on Amazon, so yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. A bit peeved that a book so important to my task should be out of reach – and Butterwick’s book wasn’t even 250 pages long anyway – I decided that I would have to build my own account of PL in a European context. I did this by painstakingly raiding those books which dealt with a small subsection of Polish history in the 18th century, and then combining these pieces together in my notes, before putting them into a script.

Some examples of books I have used for this purpose, just off the top of my head, is Adam Zamoyski’s excellent book *Poland’s Last King*, which examines the reign of Stanislaw Poniatowski, the final monarch of the Commonwealth. Norman Davies’ *God’s Playground* is in there too of course, though Davies’ tends to rush through the 18th century a bit too quickly for my liking, and we’ll be doing anything but rushing in this podcast series. Another book which I was fortunate to find freely available on archive.org, and which in many ways is still the best of its kind on the subject, is *The Second Partition of Poland* by Harvard professor Robert Howard Lord, published in *1915*.

Countless other books will also make an appearance, some of which I was obliged to pay top dollar for, for the simple reason that they are as essential to this study as they are rare. Of course, as I have done with other series since, the story in between will be padded out significantly by the academic articles I am fortunate to have access to as a legacy member of UCD’s library. Because books on Polish history, particularly in the 18th century, seem so rare, it was quite a comfort to note that while historians didn’t rush to release a book on the subject, many times they did write an article on a given topic which was just as informative. I should reiterate though that building this narrative was not easy, and I didn’t expect it to be. As I think JFK once said, we do these things not because they are easy but because they are hard.

PINYL is a love affair which I have been nursing for some time, and it appealed to me not just because I was utterly fascinated by the subject matter, but also, as I am wont to do within the realm of history podcasting, I am always gripped by the appeal of going where no other history podcaster has gone before. No other podcaster has examined the JC in the detail I did in 2014; just as no other history podcaster has examined Ireland’s 1916 rising in the way that I did, or taken 1,250 pages to explain the TOV. No history podcaster, as far as I know, has examined Louis XIV’s era in the obsessively detailed way that I did. The thing is of course, these were all projects which took place under the banner of WDF. Here, we’re going to be branching out on our own, but this hadn't always been the plan…

I always knew that researching Polish history in proper detail was bound to be a challenge. It was with this challenge in mind that I approached the idea of a Polish History Miniseries, which I set as a goal, and which I promised I would start producing, once I passed the target of $500 on Patreon. Thanks to the generosity of my Patrons, we have since surpassed that target and never looked back, but it was when I accepted that a PHM would now require my attention, and when I got those same Patreon supporters to vote on the century they would like me to tackle, that two things happened. The first was that, clearly, the 18th century won the vote. This surprised me, since I knew that it was the most depressing of the Commonwealth’s existence. The second thing that happened though, was that in spite of the depressing nature of the content, I quickly concluded that I had a great story in front of me. What was more, I concluded that it would take more than a miniseries to tell this story.

From these conclusions, my imagination began to run a bit wild, until I settled on the fact that if I wanted to do the story of Poland in the 18th century justice, I would have to go into proper detail to do it, and release as many episodes as was necessary to get the story told. After that, it was only natural to imagine a brave new project, which is available exclusively for Patrons at the $5 level and above. These two introductory episodes, and one more episode from the introductory section looking at how Poland became the PLC, will be available for free, but after that, essentially after September, this goodness will only be available for patrons, and I will be promoting this series as I promoted 1956, or the Jan Sobieski biography series. Speaking of that latter series, to celebrate the fact that we are about the tackle Poland in the 18th century, I figured there was never a better time to make that series more accessible, so it is now available to $2 patrons and above, rather than exclusively $5 folks.

Patrons listening right now can of course ignore this message, but I should reiterate that I am venturing into my first of four years in a History PhD programme, and while this is absolutely amazing and the culmination of everything I’ve worked for over the last ten years, it is also expensive, and likely to be exhausting. So, if you want to support me and the show, first and foremost, please tell someone about it, and spread the word about what we’re doing here with PINYL. Perhaps, even if you won’t be in the neighbourhood by shelling out a fiver a month, some other Polish fan will. If you do feel like you’ve been waiting all this time to signup though, and you just never got around to it, then clearly, there has never been a better time.

Unlike when we were drowning in content during the VAP, with our current schedule we have the TYW coming out every second week, and PINYL every other week, with the result that patrons will retain the weekly schedule, but regular listeners will have new content every fortnight. This reduces the stress upon me, and means that we still have a podcast to put out there, and I still get the necessary income so I can continue to eat and live. I would never have been happy with ignoring the podcast while the PhD is in session, so to prevent that catastrophe, I figured it was better to reduce our output than to eliminate it altogether. Maybe now you’ll actually have a chance to check out all that stuff you’d been unable to dig into in the past – and hey, now you’ll actually have time to breath between each episode, what a novel concept!

It is worthwhile now to talk for a bit about our theme music, and the theme from which this podcast series has taken its name. As you saw from our opening quotation, and the fact that we opened the episode with that lovely tune, the Polish National Anthem will be our soundtrack. The Polish National Anthem is known to Poles as the **(**Mazurek Dąbrowskiego**)**, and it takes the form of a lively folk dance with patriotic words written shortly after the final partition. It was created between 16 and 19 of July, 1795 in Reggio di Emilia in Italy, just as the Polish legions were leaving Italy to fight with Napoleon, in what were then merely the French Revolutionary Wars, under the command of general Jan Henryk Dąbrowski (1755-1818). Dabrowski is of course the Dabrowski of ‘March, March Dabrowski’, in case you were wondering. Polish affinity for Napoleon Bonaparte was an important fact of these wars, so it’s only appropriate that the full version of the anthem captures this fact. The author of the “Song of the Polish Legions in Italy” – as the anthem was originally called – was supposed to have been Józef Wybicki, General Dąbrowski’s close associate, but there remains an element of uncertainty over who actually wrote the music and provided the words.

The folk tune and the inspiring texts, with the first verse beginning with “Poland’s not dead as long as we live” immediately captured the attention of the soldiers, Poland’s émigrés and the country inhabitants. Thanks to the flexibility of the Polish language though, that first line of the anthem has been translated in several ways, one of them being PINYL, so that’s the version we’re going for in our series. It was in many ways an essential message, for those Poles who marched under Napoleon’s banner were stateless, according to the standards of the time. That Napoleon was soon to change this with his creation of the Duchy of Warsaw, singled the French dictator out as a figure of affection, admiration and fierce loyalty for countless Poles who served in Napoleon’s armies, and who were with him to the end. The end of Napoleon meant the end of Polish independence though, a light which was not to shine until the deliberations of Versailles had been worked through, and the Third Republic was declared in 1921. It was to last just 19 years.

It should go without saying that I will, on occasion, have some trouble with pronunciation, so do bear with me. If any Polish natives or expats are currently listening in, then thank you so much for joining, I hope I do your nation justice, and do get in touch with me, politely, if I happen to butcher any of your great statesmen’s names – I will as always, do my best. FYI, I will be making use of the Anglicised version of Polish words where possible. Since this is a podcast, the intention is to make the spoken word as clear as possible, and to not become too bogged down with definitions or technicalities, and it is for that reason that I do not intend to give you a lesson in the Polish language, since I’m the last person qualified to do something like that. The aim of this series, as much as the book which will hopefully follow it someday, is to bring the history of Poland to an English speaking audience in an accessible, digestible and above all enjoyable format. This is the unspoken goal of mine in starting this and any other history podcast I take on, so I hope I will have you patience as we work through any issues that may pop up.

So this is it! After so much preparation, I can’t believe this is finally happening! It should go without saying that I am very excited to begin PINYL, but as I mentioned before, we have some introductory episodes to get into first before we simply launch into the story of the PLC, in fact we have ten in total to get through, but don’t worry, while it delays our beginning of the story, it will certainly be of interest to all enthusiasts and nerds alike. So with that being said I hope you’ll join me in the first of these introductory episodes as we ask that important question – how did the Commonwealth become a Commonwealth? I hope you’ll join me for that but until then, my name is Zack and this has been the second introduction episode for PINYL. Thanks for listening history friends and patrons, and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. A simple Google search provides ample evidence of this fact. See one example in particular: https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/MAGAZINE-orgy-of-murder-the-poles-who-hunted-jews-and-turned-them-in-1.5430977 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/poland-asks-citizens-abroad-to-report-anti-polish-sentiment-1.5824052 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gershon Hundert, ‘An Advantage to Peculiarity? The Case of the Polish Commonwealth’, *AJS Review*, Vol. 6 (1981), pp. 21-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)