




UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET



Multilayered, Selective and Contested:
The Heritage of Polish-Lithuanian
Commonwealth
in Polish Role-playing and Reenactment

Michał Mochocki

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET



This is my plan for the 30 minutes

- 1) How the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC) emerged and collapsed
- 2) Memory of PLC in PL heritage discourses and narratives
- 3) How PL role-plays and reenactments engage with it

...and I'm sure to run out of time when I get to point 3!





PL heritage is tied with LT+BEL+UA

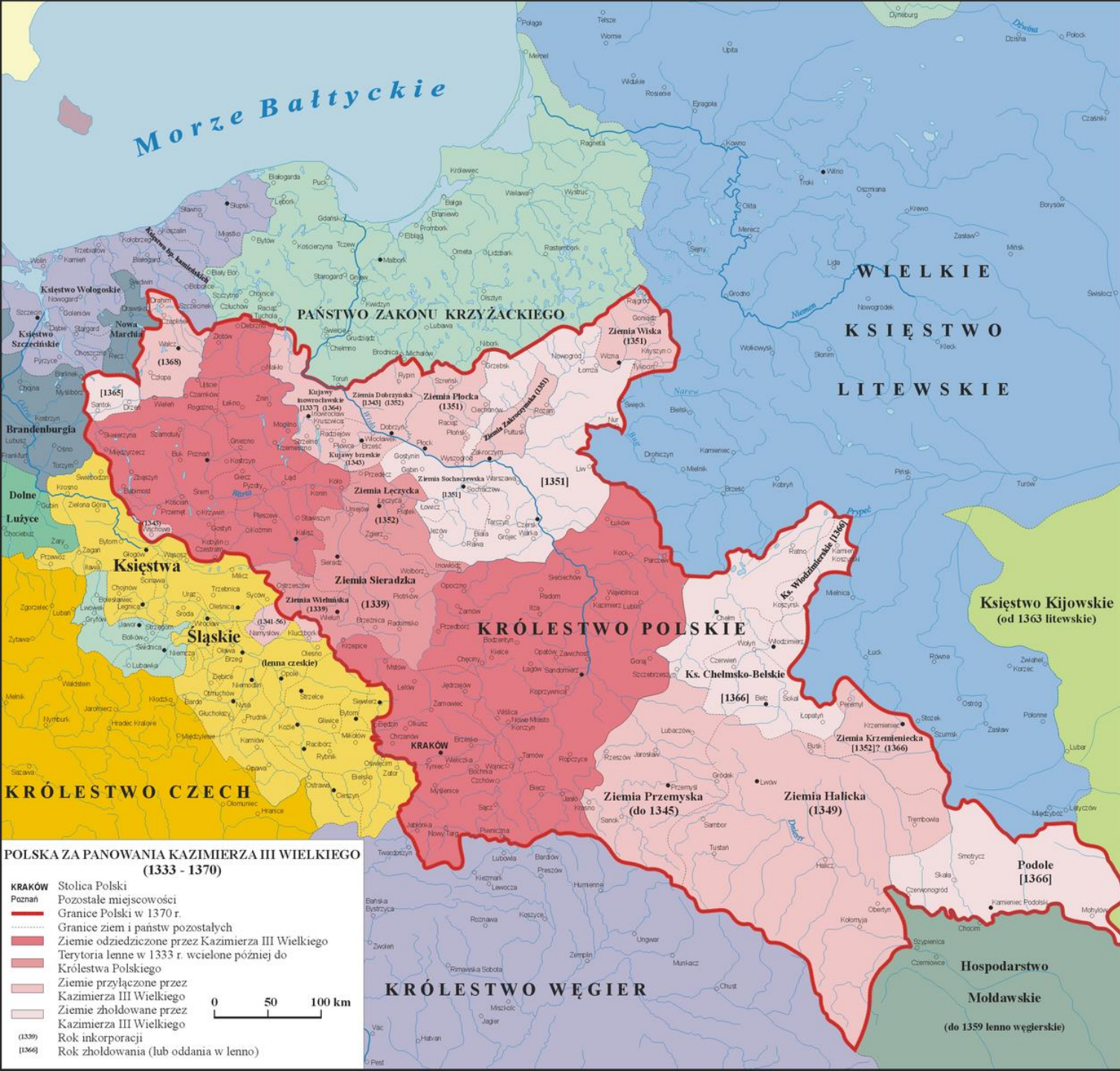
- 300+ years of solitary PL history (966-1385)
- **400+ years of union with Lithuania (1385-1795)**
- 100+ years of shared trauma under RU rule (1795-1918)

to Poles, the memory of the pre-colonial PLC was a major heritage resource in resisting Russification/Germanisation



Kievan Rus & Poland in 10-11th c.





13th c. Rus fell to Mongols

14th c. Mongols decline, leave multiple weak Rus principalities

Lithuanians take over most of the Rus lands, Poles a small piece

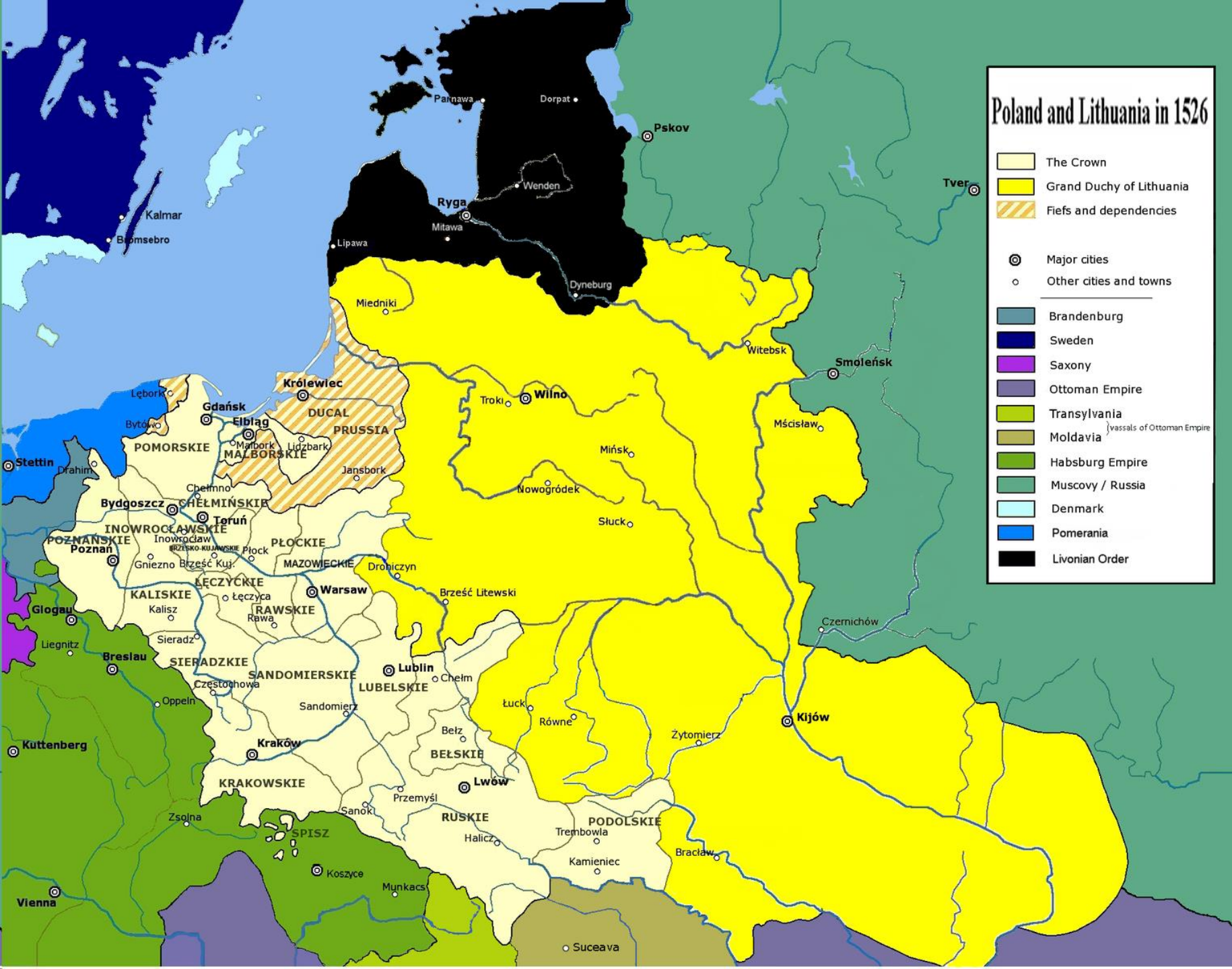


UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET



late 14th c. PL and LT form a personal union of two separate states

LT grand duke marries PL queen and starts the new PL-LT dynasty (Jagiellons)



early 16th c.

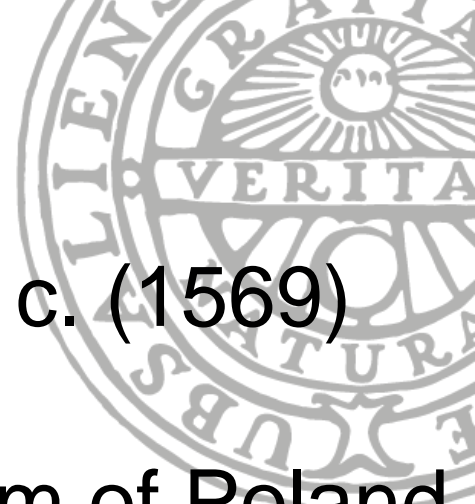
Grand Duchy of Muscovy (Moscow) wants all Rus lands, threatens LT

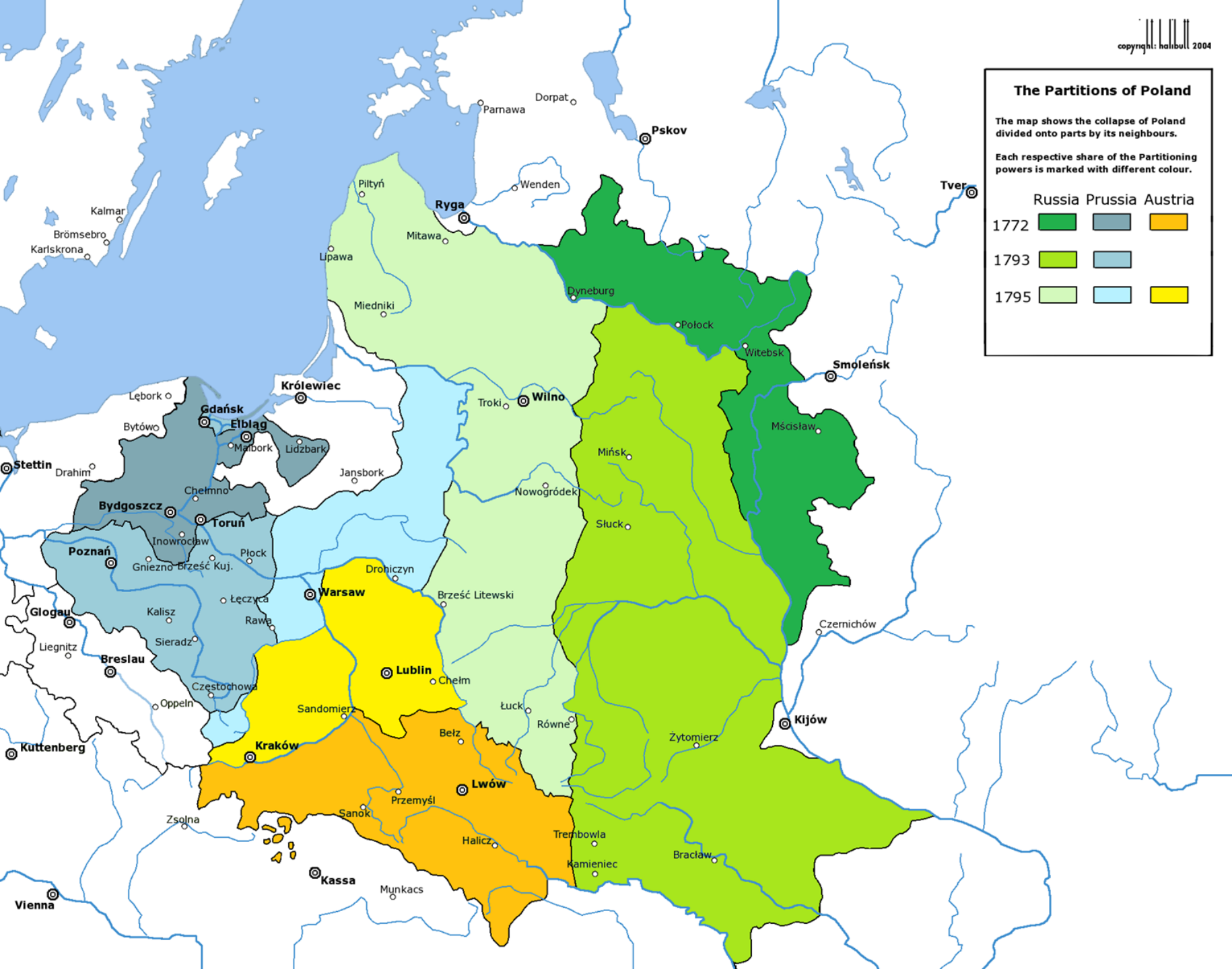




16th c. (1569)

Kingdom of Poland
 +
 Grand Duchy of Lithuania
 =
 Commonwealth of Two Nations





copyright: halibull 2004



late 18th c.
 PLC under RU
 hegemony

1772, 1793, 1795
 Partitions of PLC
 by Russia, Austria
 and Prussia



1815-1918

so-called Congress
Kingdom of PL
united with RU

RU czar = PL king



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Fluctuations of sovereignty

- 1918 post-WW1 Republic of PL (2nd Commonwealth)
- 1945 post-WW2 People's Republic of PL (in Soviet bloc)
- 1989 democratic election (sovereign 3rd Commonwealth)
- 1999 joins NATO, 2004 joins European Union

PL national imagery in the last ~100 years includes:

- memory of PLC and prior PL kingdom as the rise of nation
 - memory of 123 years of partitions by three empires
 - liberation in 1918 (only to fall to GER/RU in 1939)



How colonisers wanted PLC to be remembered

inferior civilisation: uneducated, brutal, unruly, self-destructive barbarians on a radically lower level than Western Europe (and as RU modernisation by then-Western standards)

enlightened man's burden: in "press packs" sent to FR "influencers" by the 3 empires, PL were incapable of self-governance and self-reforming → needed a civilising mission

racialisation: PL as dark-hued "Iroquees of Europe" (Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm); "only the Germans made the Poles human" (Max Weber)



How PL remembers PLC – main themes



Cradle of parliamentary democracy

- **Civil liberties, parliament, royal elections, rule of law**
- Restricted to noblemen; and most of it gone or degenerated anyway in the 18th c. with omnipresent corruption and obstruction of parliament (infamous "liberum veto")

Rare religious tolerance

- **Law protecting freedom of Christian religions, plus tolerance and autonomy for Jewish and Muslim groups**
- Also degenerating in the 17th c. to change into mass-scale Catholic bigotry and persecutions in the 18th



How PL remembers PLC – main themes



Military superpower

- **Winged hussars, capture of Moscow, saving Vienna, and many famous victories against much larger forces**
- Most embarrassing decline in the 18th c. due to resistance to military modernisation and to taxation

Catholic antemurale

- **Catholicism foundational to the state and society**
- In fact, huge populations of Orthodox and Protestants, with religious freedoms guaranteed by the law



How PL remembers PLC – main themes



Oligarchy of mighty families

- **Power and wealth in the hands of a few magnate families who stand above the law**
- More true in LT/RU than PL parts, less true before mid-17th

Omnipresent serfdom

- **majority of population = peasants in brutal serfdom comparable to slavery**
- more true in some regions; many forms beyond serfdom



How PL remembers PLC – main themes



West meets East

- **Catholic + Orthodox, PL+LT+Rus, between GER and RU**
- the West represented by Latin script, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in PL and its GER-influenced regions, where civil liberties and rule of law were the strongest
- the East represented by mainly-Orthodox, Cyrillic-writing and Rusyn/Ruthenian-speaking Lithuanian Rus (now Belarus) and the ex-center of former Kiyvan Rus (Ukraine), dominated by magnate oligarchies (often with bloodlines and titles of medieval LT dukes and Kievan Rus princes)



How PL remembers PLC – main themes

Russia as an (or *the*) eternal major threat

enemy, hegemon and invader from the 16th to 20th c.

Ukraine as a troublesome neighbour coveted by RU

bloody conflicts, dreams of Commonwealth of Three Nations

Prussia (Germany) as a threat *and* eager RU collaborator

partitions in the 18th, Kulturkampf in 19th, nazism in 20th

Islam as an external threat PL can handle

memory of wars with the Ottoman Turkish empire



4 major PLC heritage discourses now



1. Roots of democracy, rule of law, religious tolerance

based primarily on the 16th c., even before PLC formed

(championed by: liberal democrats, Protestants, EU supporters)

2. Bastion of Catholicism and patriarchal conservatism

based on legacy of counterreformation and its overwhelming success in the late 17th/18th c.

(championed by: Catholic church, conservatives)



4 major PLC heritage discourses now

3. A failed state of corrupt oligarchy and feudal anarchy

based mainly on the phase of pre-Partition decline in the 18th c., and on 19th-c. colonial narratives of the invading empires (championed by: Soviet/post-Soviet PL historians, socialists)

4. PL as a slave labour empire and coloniser of Rus

based in part on postcolonial theory, in part on the 19th-c. colonial narratives by the invading empires

(championed by: Soviet and post-Soviet UA and RU historians, some PL adopters of postcolonial theory)



Dzikie Pola TTRPG – its heritage mission



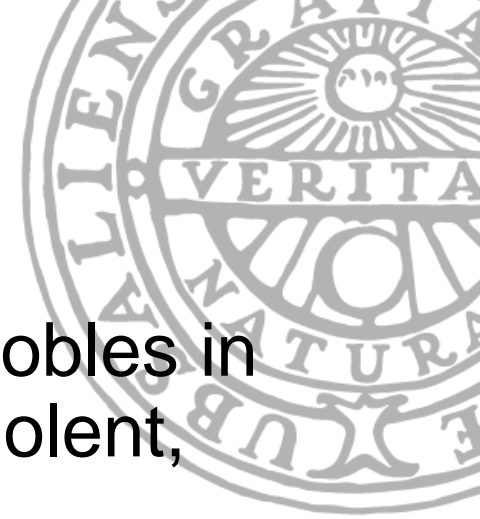
Released in 1997, only 8 years after liberation from the Soviet bloc: a time of redefining PL among Western democracies.

Heritage-related goals declared by authors and many fans:

- Challenge the patronising discourses of Western Europe, echoing the old colonial narratives of PL having to learn civilised (here: liberal democratic) ways from the West
- Be a PL voice and PL setting in the flood of Western mass and popular culture rapidly expanding to the PL market
- Revive the PLC setting in historical adventure fiction next to cloak-and-dagger, samurai, pirates, Vikings etc.



Dzikie Pola TTRPG (1997)



1st ed. a parodistic focus on the vices of poor landless nobles in search of money and fame: hot-headed, naive, drunk, violent, but boasting a sense of honour, strength and freedom
(compare: a posse of trigger-happy hired guns in the Old West)

heritage discourses: 1) democracy, liberty and rule of law, contrasted with 2) feudal anarchy and magnate oligarchy

themes: all – 1) cradle of liberty, 2) religious freedom, 3) military superpower, 4) bastion of Christianity, 5) oligarchy and anarchy, 6) cruel serfdom, 7) RU and GER as threats;

new theme: folkloristic magic, devils and pact with the Devil



Dzikie Pola TTRPG (2nd ed. 2005)



2nd ed. a comprehensive view of the society and its affairs: not only frontier adventures of landless firebrands but also political, economic and socio-cultural themes

- women and non-nobles as player character types

same heritage discourses: 1) democracy, liberty and rule of law; contrasted with 2) feudal anarchy and magnate oligarchy

same themes: all – 1) cradle of liberty, 2) religious freedom, 3) military superpower, 4) bastion of Christianity, 5) oligarchy and anarchy, 6) cruel serfdom, 7) RU and GER as threats, 8) magic, witchcraft and devils



Dzikie Pola -inspired LARP



Nearly all PLC larps were created by *Dzikie Pola* community, and followed its interests and sensibilities. Often:

- low on mechanics and plot, with the experience of "being" a PLC inhabitant as the key fun (like a themed party)
- role-playing often perceived as performative of the player's 'Sarmatian' identity (Sarmatia = romantic name for PLC), supposedly shared by the player and the character
- its core features: 1) appreciation of civil liberties and participatory democracy, 2) and of the political and cultural heritage of PLC, 3) with self-identification as its descendant



Dzikie Pola community on other fields

Most involved players followed PLC in other venues:

- PLC historical reenactment
 - historical edu-projects
 - PLC culture and arts events
- other PLC media: fiction, film, games, nonfiction
- domestic traditions: cuisine, home décor, festivities
- PLC game-making: VETO CCG, Hearts of Stone DLC to Witcher 3, Brancalonia PL ed., 7th Sea 2nd ed.



The main themes in education on PLC

- unique union of peoples and cultures, predecessor to UE
- cradle of civil liberties, democracy, rule of law (elected kings)
- ...which contrasted with despotisms and tyrannies all around
- national costume, sabre, horse, lifestyle of PLC nobles
- military equipment and famous victories (winged hussars)
- economic and social diversity of PLC groups (nobles, too)

Rarely spoken of:

- serfdom and general brutality of life
- decline and degeneration of state and society in 18th c.



Now about historical reenactment

- many RH groups are infantry, who were mostly non-nobles
- RH tended to distrust role-playing in general, fearing that imaginative play-pretend would replace high-quality gear
- RH emphasises material culture, often with no interest in reenacting or promoting anything else

However, with many role-players joining RH:

- light role-play of social personas became normalised, mostly among reenactors of cavalry units and civilian nobility
- winged hussars resurfaced as elite (due to cost) cavalry



Historical reenactment vs roleplay

- RH reenacts military victories and national past: a natural ally of conservatives, nationalists, the church and the state
- Catholic church, local govt and national govt oftentimes are partners or sponsors of RH, incl. funding of hussar units
- some outspoken leaders of RH winged hussars are anti-EU nationalists, anti-Semites and Catholic fundamentalists, and build their PLC heritage narratives accordingly
- by contrast, PLC enthusiasts coming from the role-playing scene tend to be pro-EU, pro-democratic and pro-diversity



PL-UA-UE relations now



anti-UE nationalists tend to be anti-UA, too; they object against "Ukrainisation of Poland" by UA refugees and keep reminding of historical UA crimes (also from PLC times)

- former PLC role-players, who are still active in historical education, campaign for mutual understanding of shared heritage of PL and UA as two sister nations

→ happening now: #MyRazem (UsTogether) edu-project for PL and UA youth about the centuries of shared history, with PLC at its center - <https://myrazem.net/projekt/>



The grim relevance of PLC heritage in 2022



- **RU is a threat to all ex-PLC nations, again**
- millions of refugees make PL+UA people live side by side
- UA joining UE = UA+PL+LT in one political union, again
- PLC heritage increasingly often emerges in public debates, with its unfulfilled idea of Commonwealth of **Three Nations**
- PLC heritage does include bloody PL-UA warfare, but also mutual nation-building and kicking RU ass.



Final thought

PLC role-playing scene seemed to have died in early 2010s.
Will the sudden interest in PL-UA bridge-building bring it back?

Apparently - **PLC role-plays have a role to play.**

THANK YOU!

michal.mochocki@gmail.com

