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## A Nation on the Periphery of History: A Discussion of Poland-Lithuania During the Reformation

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A Nation on the Periphery of History: A Discussion of Poland-Lithuania During the Reformation

Dillon Piorkowski

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The Reformation was a period of dramatic change for Europe. From the lowest social level to the highest, this reformation of religion and society affected nearly the entire continent. Although it started in Germany, this tumultuous series of events spanned across the whole of Europe. From as far west as Spain and far east as Hungary, no part of Europe was left unaffected. And one such example was the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. Although they were and still are a very underdiscussed polity in Western historical circles, the Polish certainly left their mark on the Reformation. To be specific, the use of the term “Western” will allude to the Anglophone world in Western Europe and North America. But, in general, the Western historiographical account of the Reformation does not give enough credit to Poland’s relative significance. For example, in a well-known textbook by Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, Poland is only mentioned on a mere 12 pages.<sup>1</sup> However, this is on the higher end as many others refer to it even less. But despite the lack of appreciation in Western historiography, the role Poland served during the Reformation was important. Almost completely unique in its own right, Poland was a diverse and tolerant society: “the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth... attained a high level of religious tolerance, close to equality in rights.”<sup>2</sup> Its unique culture and political system allowed for social and religious toleration during the Reformation. In turn, this created an environment in which Protestantism could spread. And out of this environment also came several important reformers like Jan Łaski (or John a Lasco) and the Radziwiłłs. Nearly nowhere else in Europe at that time was there a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious kingdom like Poland-Lithuania.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5, 204, 218, 279-81, 284, 295, 336-9, 607.

<sup>2</sup> Wojciech Kriegseisen, “Toleration, or Church-State Relations?” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 107 (2013): 83, <https://doi.org/10.12775/APH.2013.107.03>.

<sup>3</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2004), 190-191, Kindle edition.

In specific, this project hopes to establish several key points. One of which is that Poland is unfairly represented in Western historiography. Again, this means that in the English-speaking academic world, Poland is discussed disproportionately. Countries like Germany, France, and Britain have thousands of pages written about them discussing their roles during the Reformation. But Poland does not. This is evidenced by the many Western textbooks that misrepresent the nation. In turn, the project will use these various textbooks as evidence. The second point this project aims to cover is why Poland's underappreciation is unfair. Simply demonstrating how Poland is underrepresented is easy, but showing Poland's relative significance is more difficult as it is more subjective. Nonetheless, the project will reference historical correspondence, unique aspects of Poland (its religious, social, and political structure), the Polish print industry, and Polish reformers to support the point that the country deserves more detail in Western historiographies. Specifically, the reformer Jan Łaski and his work, the *Forma Ac Ratio*, will be vital to the argument. Finally, the third aim of this project is to answer why. Overall, why is Poland so underdiscussed? And why does the West seemingly ignore the nation's history and achievements? Also, to address possible criticisms, it must be noted that the author of this project cannot read Polish. This means many of the referenced works are in English or were translated to English. In turn, the scope of the project is possibly narrower than if the author could read the Polish sources. And it also may seem hypocritical to advocate for Poland in a historiographical context without full knowledge of its language. Nonetheless, I took great care to ensure that a fair argument is being made in favor of Poland despite the lack of language proficiency.

However, before starting the actual argument, some context is needed. Regarding what was happening in the continent in general, the period of the 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> century was a

progressive time for learning. Besides setting the seeds of the Reformation, this timeframe also included the Renaissance. In brief, this event was the rediscovery of the past. It was Europeans recovering aspects of the literature and arts of the ancient Greeks and Romans and seeking to replicate them in their own time. Like its neighbors to the west, Poland was no stranger to these advancements in the arts: “Poland-Lithuania may be regarded as one of the most accomplished Renaissance states.”<sup>4</sup> But beyond just Poland, the Renaissance was a new passion for art and literature throughout Europe. Critical to this was the philological interest in the ancient languages of Latin, Greek and, eventually, Hebrew. Bibles in Hebrew and Greek, Latin manuscripts from the old Church, and more were found and studied by scholars during this time.<sup>5</sup> They combined these historical findings with their then-current theological and philosophical knowledge to better understand the Bible, Christianity, and the nature of life. These new scholars were known as humanists. Found throughout Europe, though mostly in Western and Central Europe, the humanists dedicated themselves to learning from the great past civilizations.

Specifically, humanism as a subject is hard to give a strict definition. While it originally started as a simple study of words, it quickly expanded into philosophy, theology, and even politics. Works by figures such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero helped shape new beliefs and understandings about the spiritual and physical world. For example, much of late medieval and early modern philosophy drew influence from Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> In general, though, the study of humanism overlapped with many different subjects. However, all coincided with an appreciation for the experts of the past. Diarmaid MacCulloch described it as “a difficult phenomenon to pin

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<sup>4</sup> Antoni Mączak, “Poland,” In *The Renaissance in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 184.

<sup>5</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 77-79.

<sup>6</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 78-79.

down and define... [as] no one used the word in the first age of humanism.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, scholars were studying humanist topics before they were even given the label of humanist. Another definition of humanism, given by Carl Lindberg, described the study as “[an approach] which strove to apply the critical intellectual recovery of ancient sources to education, the church and society as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> But whatever its definition, it was clearly a guiding factor in the leadup to the Reformation. Many of the Reformers, both magisterial and grassroots, came from humanist roots. And to no exception, Jan Łaski was also influenced by the movement. It was his initial encounters with humanism that helped lead him down the path of becoming a reformer.

Furthermore, Poland’s involvement in modern historiography is also an important piece of context. While this point will be discussed throughout the project, it must also be introduced here as much of the argument involves it. So, before expanding further on the other points, it must be iterated what injustice Western bias has done to Polish history. As with the majority of Eastern Europe, much of Western historiography primarily views Poland as a nation on the periphery. It was there, and everyone knew it existed. But it seemingly did not hold much real significance. As depicted by many books, Poland-Lithuania was a far-off observer that watched the more important areas of France, Germany, England, and the Netherlands produce the Reformation. Again, the historiography produced by Western authors underscores this fact. In the book, *The European Reformation* by Carter Lindberg, Poland (or Poland-Lithuania) is not cited anywhere in the index.<sup>9</sup> And what’s worse is how many times this book references Jan Łaski. Unlike the many pages dedicated to Western European reformers, Łaski has a mere page where he is referenced. And this is only to credit him for his naming of the English

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<sup>7</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 434-444.

Mennonites.<sup>10</sup> Forgetting everything he did and contributed, he only minorly matters in this book due to his relation to the English Reformation.

Unfortunately, this theme is common, and Łaski is often referred to almost like he was a “token” Eastern European. Yes, he was from Poland, but he is only mildly significant in Western textbooks because of what he did in Western Europe. If he is not associated with the British Isles, he is associated with East Friesland. It is a testament to Poland’s lack of respect that Jan Łaski is barely associated with it. While it is hard to see in most Western textbooks, Łaski was actually a very important part of the Reformation at large. In fact, he was important enough to warrant correspondence with some of the most well-known figures like Thomas Cranmer and Phillip Melancthon.<sup>11</sup> The project will elaborate further on this later, though. And although it is true that Łaski had a lasting impact in England, he was much more than just another reformer in the British Isles.

Moreover, another instance of Western underrepresentation is in De Lamar Jensen’s work, *Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution*. On its own, it’s a good overview of the Reformation as a whole. But it only mentions Poland on 3 pages and Jan Łaski on 2.<sup>12</sup> The importance of other figures and regions during the Reformation can be debated, but a mere 5 pages dedicated to Polish history is not sufficient by any means. And connecting back to the previous point, these pages fail to mention any native printing industry. The book, like others, depicts Poland as an outside region that only took in ideas from the more important Western Europe. Although this is just one other example, this tends to be the West’s historiographical

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<sup>10</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 302.

<sup>11</sup> Dirk W. Rodgers, “Łaski, John,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2003, 4, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> De Lamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lexington, MD: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 96, 153, 181, 462-463.

narrative of Poland during the Reformation. And like their home country, Polish figures from the Reformation have also received this same treatment.

However, now that the project has been introduced and given context, the aforementioned points can be expanded upon. For clarity, the first point (Poland being underrepresented) is something that will be addressed, but it will be a continuous topic throughout. Various examples will be given where applicable as they relate to the argument. So, to start with the next point, Poland deserves further study as it was quite unique. Specifically, Polish history differs from that of most other European countries as it was nearly always multi-ethnic and multi-religious. For centuries, Poland possessed large populations of Jews, Ruthenians, and other Slavs.<sup>13</sup> While not every European kingdom was completely homogenous during this time, none compared to Poland. In the various Western European kingdoms, Jews and outsiders in general did not really have a place in society. They would endure persecution and outright violence. But in Poland, they had a unique safe haven: “Jews in Germany regarded Poland as a place of refuge and immigration.”<sup>14</sup> Though this toleration was just that, toleration, it was a level of existence they could not have in other kingdoms. And some Jews were quite successful even. The fortunate ones were able to work as accountants, bankers, and estate managers for the nobility.<sup>15</sup> This made them a well-liked and protected group in urban Poland. As money lending was “immoral” for Christians, Jews were able to fill this role and carve out a niche for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Even prior to the Reformation, tolerating different minority groups was a significant aspect to life in Poland. Large in part due to the sizeable Jewish population, as early as the 13<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 49, 51.

<sup>16</sup> “Antisemitism in History: The Early Modern Era, 1300-1800,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-the-early-modern-era-1300-1800>.



century, the kingdom created laws to protect the different religious and ethnic groups. Specifically, to deal with the large Jewish populations moving out of the German states in the 1200s, Polish princes and noblemen created statutes to let them settle in certain towns. For instance, in 1264, Prince Boleslas signed a charter which, in essence, granted Jews privileges and the right to live in his principality.<sup>17</sup> Again, what enabled much of this toleration was Poland's unique government and politics. In contrast with many other European monarchs, the Polish king was relatively weak. Domestic matters were largely handled by the nobles (or the Szlachta) as they governed the urban centers of Poland. The power of the nobility was even further enhanced as they were the primary members of the Polish parliament. This was the case in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but this structure lasted well into the Reformation during the 16<sup>th</sup> century as well. This political power they possessed was especially significant during the Reformation as many of them would convert to Protestantism.<sup>18</sup> They were able to protect the religion's spread. While in other kingdoms there were plenty of Protestant nobles, Poland was unique in the sense that its Catholic kings had to tolerate the existence of these powerful Protestants. The monarchs were either not strong enough to act or simply had nothing to gain from it. Eventually, this would change. But the structure of Poland would remain for several centuries.

Moreover, the fact the nobility had the power to guarantee the protection of certain groups within their domain was vital to Poland's Reformation. Beyond just the Jews, Protestants whose beliefs aligned with the nobles would also receive protection. Even against the Catholic kings, the Protestant Reformation would be safe in these Protestant domains. Again, unlike other European monarchs, the Polish crown was quite weak. It was never able to "attain the stage of

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<sup>17</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Jacek Wijachka, "The Reformation in Private Towns in the Polish Crown in the 16th Century," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14622459.2020.1871238>.

consolidation into an absolute state.”<sup>19</sup> This was similar to the Holy Roman Empire but not exactly the same. While the Holy Roman Emperor lacked the power to fully control his domain, he did have the power to eventually halt Protestantism’s spread in 1548.<sup>20</sup> But in Poland, the king did not have enough power on his own to act against Protestantism. So, as the nobles converted to Protestantism, the Polish kings were relatively powerless against the religion’s spread.

Furthermore, even though the kings were Catholic, there was still a tradition of tolerance. At least with the Jews, many Polish kings were somewhat protective of certain groups. This was in stark contrast to the other European monarchs of the time. For instance, in response to a crusader-led pogrom in 1463, King Casimir IV “fined the city Council [of Cracow] heavily, making the sum extra high to guarantee that peace would prevail.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, during some points in Polish history, there were rulers who were not so tolerant. But even the most antisemitic or anti-Protestant kings still had to practice some form of tolerance. Even if they wanted to break from this tradition, they simply did not have enough political power to do so without support from the nobles. Yet this is not to say that the existence of minority groups (non-Catholics and non-Poles) was perfect. There was still a fair amount of discrimination, especially in the rural areas. For instance, there were cases of Jews experiencing robbery, rioting, and false accusations in court.<sup>22</sup> But despite this, Poland remained the best destination for many of Europe’s Jews: “Jews themselves, both within the country and abroad, looked at Polish Jews as living in security.”<sup>23</sup> And for nearly a century, certain areas in Poland became a safe place for Protestant Christianity as well.

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<sup>19</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 280.

<sup>21</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 49-50.

<sup>23</sup> Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 51.

Additionally, the reason for weak and sometimes tolerant monarchs is another aspect to Poland's unique history. Unlike most of the other European royalties (besides the Holy Roman Empire), Poland's kings were elected by an outside body that was comprised of nobles: "The szlachta, especially its lower echelons, demanded that 'free elections' be conducted for the royal throne and that all noblemen (not only the senators, as had previously been the case) have access to voting."<sup>24</sup> Kings were always elected in the past by the Polish Senate, but after 1572 all nobles could vote. Even the lower nobility was able to participate, so they labeled these as free elections. While there were some Polish dynasties like the Piasts and Jagiellonians, all monarchs had to be approved or voted on in some way. This almost oligarchic type of government obviously put a great limit on royal power. There were ways that the monarchs could circumvent the authority of the nobles, but the constraints were there. Even as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the nobles had a "legislative supremacy."<sup>25</sup> And while the Polish system was initially a divide in political power, it eventually became a divide in religious supremacy. As kings in other European kingdoms enforced their own religion, Protestant nobles in Polish cities decreed their own beliefs. This was key to the kingdom's involvement in the Reformation. It enabled the kingdom to be open to the new ideas that were fluctuating throughout Europe. Without the help of the nobility, it is unlikely that Protestantism would have reached Poland. And it would have also been unlikely that printing would have taken a more prominent role in Poland.

However, before getting to the printing industry in relation to Poland, an important aspect to discuss was Europe's urban makeup during the Reformation. Many European states prior to

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<sup>24</sup> Felicia Roșu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania & Poland-Lithuania*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Oxford Academic, 2017), 33, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uakron.edu/2443/10.1093/oso/9780198789376.001.0001>.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 164.

the Reformation were quite rural. This was true even in Western European countries like France and England. However, after the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there started to be a significant growth in the number of urban areas in Europe. Specifically, many cities and towns were growing in population and recovering from the black death: “the three or four cities of 100,000 people in 1500 had become twelve 100 years later, with the addition (among others) of Lisbon, Seville, London, Rome, and Moscow.”<sup>26</sup> These urban areas became hubs for trade, commerce, and industry. And a portion of their industry was printing. Cities the Netherlands and German states became the centers of book publishing. This newfound industry also allowed for many of these urban centers’ economies to boom. For instance, “Wittenberg’s puny economy now boomed solely because of the sudden growth in its printing industry.”<sup>27</sup> Of course this would not have been possible in the rural areas of Europe. So, print shops were almost always located near large urban areas. In general, the more urbanized a region was, the more printing shops it had.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, this newly increased level of urbanization also correlated with literacy rates. Although few peasants could read, the literacy rate of the Western European kingdoms tended to be higher than those in the East: In 1550, the German states and Britain had an estimated 16% literacy rate while Poland was probably lower than 1%.<sup>29</sup> Notably, areas in Northern Germany and the Netherlands had a large portion of the population who could read. This was further evidenced by the large output of printing: Between 1500-1600, over 2000

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<sup>26</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *The Cambridge World History, Volume 4, Part 1: Foundations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 119, Kindle edition.

<sup>27</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> Jared Rubin, “Printing and Protestants: An Empirical Test of the Role of Printing in the Reformation,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 23, no. 2 (May 2014): 273, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43554930>.

<sup>29</sup> Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Literacy,” Our World in Data, September 20, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy/>.



Prussian city of Königsberg.<sup>32</sup> However, by the 1540s, Reformed ideas also arrived in Poland. While Lutheranism had significant support, most Polish nobles would convert to Reformed Christianity due to its connections with humanism.<sup>33</sup> But returning to the spread of humanism, there were information channels that went throughout Europe with the center being in Switzerland.<sup>34</sup> These same channels were what helped carry Protestant ideas to some of the major Polish cities like Krakow and Wrocław. However, unlike certain states in Western Europe, Protestantism would remain confined to the larger urban centers. It was simply not able to expand into the countryside. Again, because of how rural Poland was, the peasants could not access the new Protestant material being printed. Even the illiterate peasants in Western Europe had access to some of the information: “Print could take the Reformation to anyone who was prepared to hear a pamphlet being read out or listen to someone explain the meaning of a printed picture.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike in certain German states where many converted, the Polish peasants remained loyal to the Latin Church throughout the Reformation. As this project will discuss later, the lack of grassroots support from peasants is one of the main reasons why Protestantism did not last as long in Poland as it did in other areas. This also could be why the Polish printing industry is downplayed in historical textbooks. As only a very small fraction of the Polish-Lithuanian population could read or even hear about Protestant works, the importance of the Polish print industry can be hard to see at first glance.

However, despite this, the Polish print industry was still another significant aspect to the Reformation in Poland. While maybe not as impactful as the other unique parts of Poland,

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<sup>32</sup> Davies, *God's Playground*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Amy Nelson Burnett, “Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2021): 377, <https://rave.ohiolink.edu/ejournals/article/379936255>.

<sup>35</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 152.

printing still had an important role. Specifically, Polish literature and reprints of other works are hugely important to the idea that Poland deserves more historical attention as they serve as tangible evidence of the Reformation. Of course, directly accessing 500-year-old documents is difficult or downright impossible for an undergrad student. But the *Universal Short Title Catalogue for Book Printing* can be used to remedy this problem. In essence, this website tracks the origins of many different books and pieces of literature from across the world. And it goes as far back as the practice of printing does. For instance, this website can track where and when various copies of pro-reform literature were printed. Luther was obviously a popular author, so his work is found across Germany and Western Europe. However, his work was also republished in other areas such as Poland.<sup>36</sup>

In particular, printing was essential to the survival of Protestantism in Europe. It was a vessel that gave life to the movement as is evidenced by this data: “Most of the German printing centers were Protestant by 1600... 70% of the top printing centers of the 1470s and 60% of the top printing centers of the 1480s and 1490s adopted the Reformation by 1530.”<sup>37</sup> In urban areas where there were many printing presses, Protestantism was able to take root and build a strong foundation. If an area could publish and manufacture literature during this period, many of its printed works would be focused on the Reformation in some way. So, uncoincidentally, areas that had strong printing industries were largely Protestant and pro-reform. However, Protestant works were printed even in Catholic areas such as the Italian states, Austria, and the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. For example, in cities like Wrocław and Krakow, Polish print shops printed works from many of the mainstream reformers like Calvin and Luther.<sup>38</sup> More than just this,

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<sup>36</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Martin Luther.”

<sup>37</sup> Rubin, “Printing and Protestants,” 23.

<sup>38</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Calvin.”

though, the printers also manufactured books written by native authors. For instance, some of Łaski's works were also published in Polish cities.<sup>39</sup> Although it was comparatively small, the Polish printing industry was still interconnected and active. So, once Protestantism reached Poland, its shops were able to produce works on the new religious sects. And of course, This was especially true in the major city of Krakow which housed Poland's oldest university, the Jagiellonian University.

Furthermore, another city that was vital to Poland's reception of new material was Königsberg. While not technically Polish, Königsberg was still very interconnected with Poland at large. It was a city in Prussia, founded by the Teutonic Knights, but it was an important crossroad so to speak. Situated in between the Holy Roman Empire and Poland, Königsberg worked as a facilitator: "Königsberg played a very prominent role in the spread of Reformation thought in the northern part of eastern central Europe... [it] developed into an important connecting point of the Reformation networks, that extended deep into neighbouring Poland-Lithuania."<sup>40</sup> Though technically Lutheran, Königsberg was an eager middleman between Poland-Lithuania and the West at large. Many of its works were in the academic lingua franca of Latin, but many were also in German and even Polish. Notably, one of the more significant works that went through Königsberg to Poland was a Polish translation of Luther's *Small Catechism* in 1545.<sup>41</sup> Along with the works from reformers, the Bible too was eventually printed in Polish here in 1553.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Łaski."

<sup>40</sup> Kęstutis Daugirdas, "The Reformation in Poland-Lithuania as a European Networking Process," *Church History and Religious Culture* 97, (2017): 359, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18712428-09703008>.

<sup>41</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Luther," <https://www.ustc.ac.uk/editions/2214210>.

<sup>42</sup> Daugirdas, "The Reformation in Poland-Lithuania," 360.



Overall, Königsberg played an important role during the Reformation. There were the preexisting channels that connected a few cities like Krakow to the rest of the humanist and scholarly world, and they were significant too: “Indeed, around 1560 Basel was the central point through which important connecting lines [went] between... Switzerland and [Poland-Lithuania].”<sup>43</sup> But in general, these humanist connections did not allow for the mass interchange of information like Königsberg did. The city was an academic and theological bridge between Poland and the rest of the Protestant world. However, these outside forces in Königsberg and Switzerland were not the only players in Polish printing.

As mentioned, Poland too had a domestic printing industry. The existence of foreign influence in printing does not explicitly discredit the Polish industry. In fact, there were a fair number of shops in the large urban centers. While not nearly as strong as the German or Dutch industries, the Polish one was still significant in its own right. Initially, outside printers helped to supply pro-reform works into Poland, but the domestic shops helped sustain the movement. According to the Universal Short Title Catalogue, there were a considerable number of pro-reform works printed within the borders of Poland-Lithuania: 65 editions of Martin Luther’s work are cited as being printed in a Polish city.<sup>44</sup> Again, foreign print remained important to the Reformation in Poland (i.e., Königsberg and Geneva), but centers like Krakow and Wrocław were also hugely important. Literature by Luther, Calvin, and even Zwingli circulated within the urbanized areas of Poland. And the same was true (albeit to a lesser extent) for domestic authors like Jan Łaski and Mikołaj Radziwiłł: According to the Universal Short Title Catalogue, during the Reformation, Łaski had 3 editions printed in Poland and Radziwiłł had 4.<sup>45</sup> These points on

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<sup>43</sup> Daugirdas, “The Reformation in Poland-Lithuania,” 365.

<sup>44</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Luther.”

<sup>45</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Łaski.”; Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Mikołaj Radziwiłł.”

their own prove that Poland is unfairly forgotten in the Reformation. The evidence demonstrates that Poland was an active participant in the Reformation. From Bibles to theological commentaries, Poland was taking part in printing and the Reformation at large. But this is not even considering the Polish-born reformers and their legacies. If Western historiography was fair, the combination of Poland's unique social and political structure, printing industry, and native-born reformers would be more than enough proof of its contributions.

However, elaborating more on these reformers, one of the most significant reformers in English and European history was actually Polish. This man was Jan Łaski. Commonly known as John a Lasco due to his work in England (Johannes a Lasco in the Netherlands), Łaski was a vital part to the Reformation as a whole. Specifically, he was vital to the spread of Reformed Christianity in northern and eastern Europe. England was probably the country he affected the most, but his influence ranged throughout Europe. Also, beyond just the spread of Protestantism, Łaski helped the religion to survive. In his work, the *Forma Ac Ratio*, he gave instructions that helped guide thousands of churches. But before elaborating on his legacy, his life and accomplishments must be described.

Specifically, Jan Łaski was born in 1499. His father, Jarosław Łaski, was the Baron of Łask. Like many other reformers, Jan Łaski was born to a noble, wealthy family. And in particular, he was the second son out of three.<sup>46</sup> But his immediate family was not that significant in his path to becoming a reformer. Probably the most impactful person in the young Jan Łaski's life was his uncle, also named Jan Łaski (1456-1531). While it is unlikely that Jan Łaski the uncle converted to Protestantism, his initial connections were what helped bring his nephew

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<sup>46</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 1.

down the path of becoming a reformer. But nonetheless, Jan Łaski was a prominent Polish aristocrat. Being the Archbishop of Gnesen, then Chancellor of Poland, and then finally the Primate of Poland, Jan Łaski the uncle was an incredibly powerful man. As such, he primarily lived in his castle in Krakow. But like many other European social elites, he was also well-traveled throughout Europe.<sup>47</sup> Some of the important places he visited were major cities in South and Central Europe like Basel, Bologna, and Padua. More importantly, though, the cities that Jan Łaski frequently visited were major centers of humanist and religious learning. Of course, this would be highly significant to the development of the younger Jan Łaski as he would join his uncle on many of these trips.

Moreover, Jan Łaski the uncle was a very formidable man. Both religiously and politically, Jan Łaski held a lot of power. And one of his greatest accomplishments was his Statute, *Commune Incliti Poloniae regni privilegium constitutionum et indultuum publicitus decretorum approbatorumque*, or simply Łaski's Statute. This work, printed in 1506, was significant as it was the first codification of law printed in Poland, and it was also the first work in Poland that was printed with illustrations.<sup>48</sup> The content of the statute was also very important beyond just the strides made in Polish printing. In essence, the law was an effort to increase the power of the nobility while further limiting the power of the king and extremely powerful aristocrats. It essentially sought to keep the monarch, aristocrats, and lower nobility as equal parts in the government. This, in turn, greatly strengthened the Polish parliament, but it also helped make the government more efficient.<sup>49</sup> While the aim was not solely to strip the king of

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<sup>47</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 1.

<sup>48</sup> Davies, *God's Playground*, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Frost, *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania: Volume I The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385-1569*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; Oxford Academic, 2015), 251-253, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198208693.003.0029>.

power, the Polish king did lose much in the aftermath of Łaski's Statutes. This is an important connection to the thesis of the project, as the king's weakness was a vital part to the Reformation in Poland. Thanks to Jan Łaski and other noble politicians, the king remained in check.

Moreover, although this progress in Polish law and printing was impressive, it is still barely mentioned in the West's historiography. Yet, despite this, Poland's governmental system (which Jan Łaski the uncle was a strong part of) was highly innovative. Beyond Poland's weak king, the country nearly had a monarchical republic: "the closest precursor of the modern presidential suffrage were the thirteen elections for king that were held between 1573 and 1764 in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth."<sup>50</sup> While it did resemble an oligarchy in many ways, some of the methods and practices also resembled a monarchical republic. This further coincided with the weak kings and strong noble classes. But with Jan Łaski the uncle, it is highly fascinating that he had this level of involvement with governmental functions. While not directly stated anywhere, it can be speculated that Jan Łaski's political skills helped his nephew court Protestant-leaning rulers. Also, being another relatively unknown figure in Western historical circles, Jan Łaski the uncle is further proof of Poland's undeserved exclusion from the Reformation's historiography. In many Reformation textbooks, including *Europe's Reformations* by James D. Tracy, Jan Łaski the uncle is not referenced a single time.<sup>51</sup> A man involved with setting the foundations of a semi-republican government and inspiring the future founder of many important churches is given no modern significance.

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<sup>50</sup> Roșu, *Elective Monarchy*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 600; Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 439; Jensen, *Reformation Europe*, 513.; James D. Tracy, *Europe's Reformations: 1450-1650*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 379.

However, returning to Jan Łaski the nephew, when he and his brothers became teenagers, they would travel with their uncle to important cities like Padua and even Rome. When Jan Łaski was about 15, he went to study at the University of Bologna. Studying subjects like history, Latin, and religious law, Łaski remained there for several years.<sup>52</sup> Although he never completed a degree, he would return to Poland, “assured by Papal letters,” to eventually become the next primate.<sup>53</sup> Łaski was essentially being groomed to take over for his uncle once he was old enough. Though, as history would play out, this did not happen. In 1523, Łaski took his first step towards becoming a Protestant reformer. On a trip to France with his older brother, Łaski made a quick stop as it was “en route.”<sup>54</sup> As fate would have it, the city he would end up in was Basel. And in this great city, Jan Łaski met the great humanist thinker, Desiderius Erasmus.

One of the most important scholars of his time, if not the most important scholar, Erasmus was the leading humanist thinker. Although being born to a Dutch family probably around 1467, Erasmus himself never associated too strongly with one country or another.<sup>55</sup> He would simply go wherever he was wanted, specifically wherever he would be funded. While he did travel a lot, later in his life he would end up in Basel, Switzerland “to oversee publication of the Greek New Testament.”<sup>56</sup> Basel was a city with a large population of humanist thinkers. It was a place that many scholars would go to be surrounded by fellow experts and humanists. For instance, after Erasmus moved there, “his religious works became more prominent” due to the

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<sup>52</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 1.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Glen Eaves and William A. Carter, “John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer in England, 1550-1553,” *Journal of Thought* 12, no. 4 (1979): 311, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1292572626/fulltextPDF/DBB460970A4A4745PQ/1?accountid=14471&parentSessionId=TbF42YioOOVadmmBwE7fQqF4bnaIlyQSawENo2oE0p4%3D>.

<sup>54</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 1.

<sup>55</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Burnett, “Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation,” 377.

connections of the area.<sup>57</sup> Again, Basel was incredibly interconnected with Europe at large. From the German-speaking lands to even Poland, Basel was one of the most important hubs of humanist learning for Europe. Also, before and during Reformation, it was “a major printing center” as well.<sup>58</sup> All these factors meant that it was the perfect place for a person like Erasmus to go. Essentially, most humanists (and many Protestants) during this time would probably visit or stay in Basel at some point.

Moreover, in Basel and beyond, Erasmus’ contribution to the study of humanism was invaluable to the progression of philosophy and theology. He was a sarcastic man, but he cared deeply for the Latin Church. He showed this through his criticism and desire for reform. For instance, Erasmus was deeply cynical about the orders of monks and nuns in Europe. He essentially saw them as pretenders who cared more about being different from society than actually following Christ.<sup>59</sup> Erasmus also disdained the specific cults in the Church like the Cult of Mary. He believed that relics and pilgrimages to “holy” sites were a waste of time. Physical items had no significance to what was spiritual. And along with this, Erasmus was also non-superstitious. Especially for his time, he was very skeptical and disdained what he saw as “forged miracles.”<sup>60</sup> While he was not the only critic of these practices, he was one of the loudest.

But Erasmus offered his criticisms from within the Church. The arguments he made and the pieces of literature he wrote were never defiantly against the Latin Church. To him and many other humanists, the study and critique of the church were to better it. And the knowledge from

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<sup>57</sup> Burnett, “Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation,” 387.

<sup>58</sup> Burnett, “Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation,” 384.

<sup>59</sup> Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 72.

the past societies of Greece and Rome was to be used as a tool to better understand the Bible: “Erasmus... envisaged a ‘restoration’ (restitutio) of Christianity in parallel to the ‘rebirth’ (renascentia) of literature.”<sup>61</sup> Essentially everything Erasmus did no matter how harsh was to serve the church. He wanted to promote a better understanding of the Bible and Christianity as a whole. And one instance of him doing this was when he retranslated the Bible. Specifically, Erasmus retranslated the Vulgate into a more modern version of Latin along with a version in Greek.<sup>62</sup> While it may seem like this was more or less insignificant, it was actually very important to understanding the Bible. Mere words and their translations changed the meaning of whole passages. For instance, Erasmus retranslated Jerome’s Vulgate Bible and changed the translation of the Greek word “metanoete.” Originally, Jerome translated this to “poenitentiam agite, [or] do penance.”<sup>63</sup> This supported the Latin Church’s practice of the sacrament of penance. But Erasmus retranslated the original Greek to mean “resipiscite” or repentance. In essence, Erasmus had totally changed the meaning of the verse and called into question one of the Church’s long-standing traditions. Contextually speaking, these retranslations were of the verses when John the Baptist was preaching in the Wilderness. Erasmus felt that, instead of telling his followers to do penance for their sins, John the Baptist was telling his followers “to come to their senses.”<sup>64</sup> This is just one example of Erasmus’ work, but it is one of many. If this project were to specifically focus on Erasmus’ many accomplishments, it would detract from the main thesis as Erasmus is very popular in Western historiography.

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<sup>61</sup> Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 99.

<sup>64</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 99.

Undeniably, Erasmus was a man of great insight and influence. So, when Jan Łaski met him in Basel in 1523, it would change the trajectory of the young Pole's life. Although their initial meeting was brief, Łaski would eventually return for a longer stay the following year. This follow-up would last a year, and this is likely when Łaski fortified his humanist beliefs.<sup>65</sup> Notably, while in Basel, Łaski would purchase Erasmus' expansive library. While he did allow Erasmus to continue using it until his death, it is significant that Łaski obtained such a resource as it was one of the largest humanist collections of the time. But beyond just physical books, Erasmus had a profound influence on Łaski. This influence on the Polish Reformer was evident through Łaski's "concern for education and moral living... and desire to reunite the dissenting factions within the Church."<sup>66</sup> Beyond just his personal philosophy, these morals that Łaski adopted from Erasmus would be further expressed his life's work, the *Forma Ac Ratio*.

However, along with Erasmus, Łaski also met several other important figures in Switzerland like Ulrich Zwingli and Conrad Pellican.<sup>67</sup> Also, Łaski even developed correspondence with Melanchthon. Again, Basel was the turning point in Łaski's career. Not only did he encounter humanism here, but he also encountered Protestantism. In a way, Łaski learned that there was a Christian path to follow beyond just the main Church. This inevitably inspired some doubts. And these doubts were further encouraged by Melanchthon who himself was corresponding with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Łaski's correspondence with Melanchthon was significant as Melanchthon was a very prominent Protestant reformer. Being one of Luther's closest colleagues, Melanchthon was eventually

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<sup>65</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 311.

<sup>66</sup> Michael S. Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio : The Influence of John a Lasco's Ordinance in Sixteenth-Century Europe" (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2004), 5, <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/13591>.

<sup>67</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 312.



viewed as one of the leading Protestant Reformers. Especially in the Lutheran community, Melanchthon was a primary figure: “Philipp Melanchthon produced a first draft of the landmark statement of emerging Lutheranism, the 1530 Augsburg Confession.”<sup>68</sup> This prestige and influence that Melanchthon carried helped to further convince Łaski to leave the Latin Church. Their connections would eventually culminate in Łaski being recruited by Cranmer to work in England. As mentioned, Cranmer and Melanchthon frequently corresponded prior to Łaski’s arrival. However, Łaski’s work for the English Church was still several decades removed from his humble stay in Basel.

Moreover, after his encounter with Erasmus and various other humanists in Switzerland, Łaski would return home to Poland. His return home was primarily at the request of his uncle. Due to complications in the family and political turmoil, however, Łaski could not remain in Poland long. Initially, his connections enabled him to work in the “ecclesiastic hierarchy” in the Polish Church, but this ended in 1531 after the death of his uncle.<sup>69</sup> In the leadup to his death, Jan Łaski the uncle became involved with controversial politics. This was a period in which the Ottoman Empire was rapidly expanding into Europe, and they were in the midst of subduing Hungary. Being situated just south of Poland and its notable city of Krakow, it was a highly important matter. As he was a high-ranking political official, Jerome Łaski, Jan’s older brother, tried to negotiate with the Turks. Unfortunately for him and his family name, this was essentially career suicide. As Jan Łaski the uncle was associated with his nephew, he quickly lost much of

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<sup>68</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 114.

<sup>69</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 2.

his political prestige. Seemingly siding with the Islamic Turks over fellow Christian kingdoms, the Łaski name became tarnished within Poland.<sup>70</sup>

After his uncle's controversy and eventual death, Jan Łaski the nephew lost his position in the Catholic Church. He and his family fell deeply into debt, and he was forced to retreat out of common life for some time. While this was happening, however, he still maintained his correspondence with the German reformer Phillip Melanchthon.<sup>71</sup> Although he was technically still a part of the Latin Church, Łaski's continued correspondence with the openly Protestant Melanchthon signaled his ultimate doubts. This culminated around the year 1537 in Saxony where, by happenstance, Łaski was able to meet up with Melanchthon.<sup>72</sup> The German reformer and the "conspicuous Polish humanist and patron of humanists" had met at long last.<sup>73</sup> This was probably the point where Łaski personally left the Catholic Church. Not long after their meeting, he began searching for a new church which he would find in Emden.

However, before he would accept a high-level position there, he briefly returned to Poland once again to see his brother on his deathbed. While in his home kingdom, Łaski was forced by officials to sign a statement swearing his loyalty to the Latin Church. This was after they learned about Łaski's recent marriage in Emden. As Łaski was still technically a clergyman in the Latin Church, he was required to stay chaste. But of course, Łaski did not personally align with the Latin Church anymore. So, while Łaski did end up "reaffirming" his loyalty, his foot was essentially already out the door. As just shortly after, in 1543, he accepted the church superintendent position in Emden, East Friesland from Countess Anna of Oldenburg.<sup>74</sup> This was

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<sup>70</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 3.

<sup>72</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 3.

<sup>73</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 312.

<sup>74</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 3.

his public, formal entry into becoming a Protestant reformer. Here, in Emden, he developed his theology and adapted a Zwinglian view of the sacrament of communion. In essence, he believed that the bread and wine were purely symbolic and that they did not transform into Christ's actual body and blood.<sup>75</sup> This was a fairly staunch difference from Lutheranism. Luther himself believed and taught that the bread and wine would actually transform into the blood and body of Christ after the ritual was performed: "Luther made it clear that it is not a human work that makes the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ. It is not the word of the priest spoken that works the miraculous change; it is the Word of promise himself – Christ – who speaks."<sup>76</sup> So, because Łaski subscribed the Reformed and not Lutheran sect of Protestantism, this closed many avenues in German countries. But as evidenced by his friendship with Melanchthon, he was still on good terms with many Lutheran figures.

Moreover, across the channel in England, a new opportunity opened for Łaski. This opportunity was given by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Due to the religious wars and the Augsburg interim, there was a possibility that Łaski's new church in Emden could come under control of the Catholic Church once again.<sup>77</sup> In essence, this could have meant that everything that Łaski worked for would have been for not. So, upon receiving an invitation from Cranmer in 1548 to visit London and possibly work for the English Church, Łaski was quick to act. While he remained only a few months, he would be back more permanently not long after. Upon his return to East Friesland, the Countess accepted the terms of

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<sup>75</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 312.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas J. Davis, "'The Truth of the Divine Words': Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-28, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 2, (1999): 328, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2544707>.

<sup>77</sup> Rodgers, "A Lasco [Łaski], John," 4.

the Augsburg Interim and forced him to resign. Having no more opportunities on mainland Europe, Łaski went back to the British Isles.

This next chapter in his life was arguably the most important and lasting part of his legacy. The time he spent in England is probably where he contributed the most to the Reformation. However, yet again, Western historiography fails Polish history and Jan Łaski. As these years in England (despite their wider importance) are briefly summarized in a few pages, Łaski is referenced as just another figure involved with the Edwardian reforms. In the book, *The English Reformation*, by A. G. Dickens, Łaski's work is merely summed up as being an influence to the English Reformer, John Hooper, and the superintendent of the Strangers' Church: "[Jan Łaski] the son of a Polish squire, an old friend of Erasmus, a former archdeacon of Warsaw... [and] superintendent of the Reformed churches of Friesland... had... influenced Hooper even before his first brief visit."<sup>78</sup> While this summary is not incorrect, it does not do much justice to Łaski's life. The Polish reformer is described by his associations more than his actual accomplishments. In contrast, Bucer is given an entire page of introduction that details his life based on his own merits. For example, Dickens describes Bucer as "the most distinguished of the newcomers [to the English Church]" and describes the majority of his life's work leading up to his involvement in England.<sup>79</sup> It is arguable that Bucer contributed more to the Reformation as a whole, but Łaski's contributions were nothing to downplay. What's more is that his life's work, the *Forma Ac Ratio*, is not mentioned even a single time. This is ironic considering how Łaski wrote much of this while in England. It is especially bad when considering the influence Łaski had on the English print industry: The Universal Short Title Catalogue tracks 7 editions

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<sup>78</sup> A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 258.

<sup>79</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 258-259.

and nearly 30 copies printed from 1540-1555.<sup>80</sup> In comparison, there was only 1 edition with 5 copies by Martin Bucer printed in England during the same time frame.<sup>81</sup>

Nonetheless, Łaski's formative time in England was much characterized by his work in the Strangers' Church. In essence, this was to be a network of churches that existed "for the sake of religious refugees broken and afflicted by calamity."<sup>82</sup> The specifics of this church will be elaborated on later. However, during his time in Basel, Łaski developed connections with several reformers like Melanchthon. In turn, this later led him to correspondence with the head of the English Church. While Cranmer attempted to recruit several Reformers, Łaski was one he put a notable effort into recruiting. This fact is exemplified through the following correspondence:

I am sorry that your coming to us has been prevented by the unlooked for intervention of some other engagement; for I have no doubt but that I should easily have satisfied... if I had had an opportunity of conversing with you upon the subject. But as you are not able to come at present, but write word that you intend to come at some future time, if you shall have previously been informed by a letter from me as to the nature of your vocation amongst us; I will converse with you by letter, and briefly explain in writing, what I shall perhaps state some- what more copiously to you in person.<sup>83</sup>

In this letter, Cranmer was trying to bring Łaski over to England. And as he was "exceedingly desirous of [Łaski's] presence," Cranmer specifically needed Łaski's help.<sup>84</sup> However, a notable part to this correspondence is that Cranmer also wanted Łaski to recruit Phillip Melanchthon. In the later portion of his letter to Łaski, Cranmer was trying to convince Łaski to bring

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<sup>80</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Jan Łaski."

<sup>81</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Martin Bucer."

<sup>82</sup> Jan Łaski, *Forma ac ratio tota ecclesiastici ministerii, in peregrinorum, potissimum verò Germanorum Ecclesia*, (Frankfurt: C. Egenolff and Egidius van der Erve, 1554; ProQuest, 2020), Pp5, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2240908645/fulltextPDF/CEF71DE5CB6F4998PQ/1?accountid=14471>.

"religionis causa calamitate fractis [et] afflictis exulibus." Translated by author with help of Google Translate.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Cranmer to John a Lasco, London, July 4, 1548, in *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation*, ed. and trans. Hastings Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846; HathiTrust, 2022), 16-17, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822022020127&view=1up&seq=8>.

<sup>84</sup> Cranmer to a Lasco, July 4, 1548, *Original Letters*, Robinson, 18.

Melanchthon with him: “we earnestly request you, both to come yourself, and, if possible, to bring Melancthon [sic]... and if your exhortation be added to my letter, I have no doubt but that he will be persuaded to accept an invitation so often repeated.”<sup>85</sup> While Łaski on his own was still vital to Cranmer’s church, his connection with Melanchthon was another important aspect to Cranmer’s plans.

By this point in Jan Łaski’s life, he had developed a serious rapport with Phillip Melanchthon. They had met up several times, and Melanchthon even tutored a pupil of Łaski in 1534.<sup>86</sup> And obviously, they were in frequent correspondence with each other since they met in Basel. Their relationship was telling of Łaski’s status as a reformer as Melanchthon himself was a very prominent figure in the Reformation. Because the two were well-connected, Cranmer tried to use Łaski as leverage in also hiring Melanchthon. While Cranmer was ultimately unsuccessful in trying to recruit the German reformer (further evidenced by Melanchthon’s lack of return correspondence), it is still notable that the two were even mentioned together at all: “We therefore request you to communicate your... opinions with us in person... you should learn [our opinions] from the bearer, John a Lasco.”<sup>87</sup> But going back to the historiographical issue, it is clear that Łaski is represented as a secondary figure during the Reformation in Western historiography. Again, his infrequent references, short summaries, and overall lack of respect for his works demonstrate this. But in reality, during the Reformation, he was mentioned alongside leading figures such as Erasmus, Cranmer, and Melanchthon. Throughout Protestant Europe, Łaski was a significant man with significant connections.

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<sup>85</sup> Cranmer to a Lasco, July 4, 1548, *Original Letters*, Robinson, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 3.

<sup>87</sup> Cranmer to Melancthon, February 10, 1549, *Original Letters*, Robinson, 22.

However, returning to Łaski's journey, in the Spring of 1550, Łaski had finally made his return to London after his initial visit in 1548. The reformer "of most upright character and sound judgement" had found his new home.<sup>88</sup> Almost immediately, Łaski started working with John Hooper, an English-born reformer, to start up the Strangers' Church. This was the church that Łaski was to be the superintendent of.<sup>89</sup> Again, this would be a small yet expansive network of Protestant Churches that would exist in England, the Netherlands, and a few other regions. As stated, the Strangers' Church would be made up of diverse peoples who spoke different languages and came from different places. According to Łaski, country of origin did not matter as all Christians could be unified through Christ. He believed that "the ministry... [and its] guarding and preservation [were] instituted by the Lord."<sup>90</sup> The Strangers' Church would be an institution unified solely through Christ, and it would offer protection to those who joined. For instance, the London branch was a refuge for many Germans during the Augsburg Interim: "Martin Bucer could write that there were in London '600 to 800 Germans [there].'"<sup>91</sup> However, these were numbers while the Church was still in its infancy. As time went on, the churches would expand in size and influence.

Moreover, setting up a church like this was, in fact, one of the primary causes for Cranmer's and Łaski's prior correspondence. Going back to 1548, Cranmer had specifically messaged Łaski about this topic:

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<sup>88</sup> C. H. Smyth, *Cranmer & the Reformation Under Edward VI*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926; HathiTrust, 2022), 59, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3947532&view=1up&seq=8&skin=2021>.

<sup>89</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 258.

<sup>90</sup> Łaski, *Forma ac ratio*, B5. "Non est igitur quod miraculosa amplius dona operaue ulla, in Ecclesiastico iam deinceps ministerio requiramus: sed eas duntaxat ministerij partes obseruemus, quas ad superstruendum (posito iam fundamento) ædifū Ecclesiæ, eiusq; custodia ac co[n]ser[v]atione[m] a Domino constitutas esse scimus." Translated by author with the help of Google Translate.

<sup>91</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 315.

We are desirous of 4 [sic] setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God, and have no wish to adapt it to all tastes, or to deal in [ambiguities]; but, laying aside all carnal considerations, to transmit to posterity a true and explicit form of doctrine agreeable to the rule of the sacred writings; so that there may not only be set forth among all nations an illustrious testimony respecting our doctrine, delivered by the grave authority of learned and godly men, but that all posterity may have a pattern to [imitate]. For the purpose of carrying this important design into execution we have thought it necessary to have the assistance of learned men, who, having compared their opinions together with us, may do away with all doctrinal controversies, and build up an entire system of true doctrine.<sup>92</sup>

In this letter, Cranmer explained why Łaski was being recruited. Essentially, Cranmer wanted to build a whole new church with specific doctrine and structure. He wanted to build something sustaining, but for that he needed Łaski's help. And this fact was further confirmed during Łaski's first trip to England. On this trip, he had "secured a place of refuge for his East Friesian congregations, should they be forced to leave the continent."<sup>93</sup> This initial meeting was Łaski's confirmation that he would become the new superintendent of the Strangers' Church.

Furthermore, the Strangers' Church itself was highly impactful during the Reformation. It helped Protestants from all over Europe find safety from the Catholic Holy Roman Empire. While the Augsburg Interim technically made it illegal for many Germans to practice Protestantism in German lands, it could not stop these Germans from practicing in England: "The revival of the 1550s was made possible... because there were bases beyond the Habsburgs' reach that could welcome exiles, and... offer support to those still at home."<sup>94</sup> Many refugees would flock to London and the other Strangers' Churches to be able to practice without persecution. And beyond taking in "various refugees who had descended in their hundreds," these churches also helped provide theological and biblical printing for home cities who were forced back under

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<sup>92</sup> Cranmer to a Lasco, July 4, 1548, *Original Letters*, Robinson, 17.

<sup>93</sup> Rodgers, "À Lasco [Łaski], John," 4.

<sup>94</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 317-318.



Catholic rule.<sup>95</sup> While their reach remained limited as their congregations were small compared to other churches, the Strangers' Churches became an integral part to the survival of the Reformation when Protestantism was seemingly on the decline.

However, although the Strangers' Church was significant in of itself, the document written to guide it was arguably even more so. This was the *Forma Ac Ratio*. Written by Łaski in 1555, it described "both the Church government and the liturgy" of Łaski's new congregations.<sup>96</sup> Essentially, this document was a guideline to the Strangers' Churches and their members. Although at first glance it may seem particularly niche as it was primarily made for the refugee churches, the *Forma Ac Ratio* was actually very influential to the wider Protestant world. Essentially, it "provided a comprehensive blueprint for Protestant congregations."<sup>97</sup> So, to start with one aspect it carried, the *Forma Ac Ratio* was incredibly innovative. It combined many aspects of Protestantism into one condensed and unified doctrine. For instance, it had aspects of "Zwingli's Eucharistic rite and Calvin's ecclesiastical discipline... [And] the ordinance included extensive commentary to explain, justify and defend the prescribed practices."<sup>98</sup> The ordinance could be used to establish a church's spiritual beliefs, but it could also be used to establish its physical structure as it also outlined church hierarchy and elections:

Whenever the Church needs one or more Ministers, a public fast is announced to the whole Church: a certain day is appointed by the Elders, for this public fast, [and] the council of the public in the Church: and a few days before it is denounced from the platform to the whole people that the whole Church should convene on that very day: and the Dominion should be prayed to with the utmost earnestness and attention of mind, for the faithful ministers chosen.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 265, 317.

<sup>96</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 265.

<sup>97</sup> Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio," iii.

<sup>98</sup> Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio," iii.

<sup>99</sup> Łaski, *Forma ac ratio*, C3. "Cvm Ecclesia vno aliquo, aut pluribus Ministris opus habet, indicitur publicum ieiunium toti Ecclesiae: constituiturq̄ dies certus per Seniores, publici huius ieiunij, [et] precum publicarum in Ecclesia: ac diebus aliquot antea e suggestu toti populo denunciatur: vt (quatenus fieri potest) tot[i] Ecclesia eo ipso

In a way, the *Forma Ac Ratio* closely resembled the home country of its author. Like Poland, the ordinance lacked a strict top-to-bottom hierarchy. As the king was elected by the nobles, the church superintendents and ministers were elected by the congregation. But from the aforementioned points, it is clear that the *Forma Ac Ratio* was a piece of all-encompassing Protestant literature. Due to the diverse congregations of the Strangers' Church, it almost had to be.

Additionally, the *Forma Ac Ratio* also had a unifying component to it. Like Erasmus, Łaski wanted to unify the Church as much as possible. Though Erasmus was a loyal Catholic and Łaski was an emboldened Protestant, both wanted to “unite the universal Church.”<sup>100</sup> The fact that Łaski used this type of language in his *Forma Ac Ratio* is interesting because this was after the Augsburg Interim. By this point, there was not much hope of reconciliation. This further demonstrated the connection between Łaski and his old mentor, but it also showed the uniqueness of Łaski's work. Most of the literature written by Protestants at this time was obviously anti-Catholic Church. So, Łaski's “Erasmian objective to reunite Christ's universal Church” was fairly counter to the mainstream Protestant beliefs of the time.<sup>101</sup>

Yet another unique aspect to Łaski's *Forma Ac Ratio* was its use of the past. In a humanist way, not unlike Erasmus, Łaski drew upon the churches of old for inspiration and support for his ordinance. For example, Łaski opposed “the Lutheran notion of transubstantiation... [because it] lacked Biblical foundations.”<sup>102</sup> According to Łaski, the original Apostolic Church practiced communion as symbolism. The significance of the sacrament was

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die constitute conveniat: ac Dominio summo studio atque attentione animi summa, pro sidelibus ministris eligedis precetur.” Translated by author with the help of Google Translate.

<sup>100</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 82.

<sup>101</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 125.

<sup>102</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 134.

purely spiritual and not physical. Łaski believed that this was further confirmed by the Apostle Paul: “the bread is... not the very substance of Christ’s natural body... Paul clearly teaches that we, who eat of one bread, are one bread. By these words of Paul is completely refuted the whole doctrine of transubstantiation of the Pope.”<sup>103</sup> And Łaski’s consistency in his beliefs would not stop there. He would even attack his host country’s tradition of kneeling during communion because this too was not found in the Apostolic Church or the Bible.<sup>104</sup> To him, the Church had to follow scripture and scripture alone. And the churches of old would demonstrate how to closely follow the Bible: “For this very reason the care of our Church should be entrusted to us, as in his in the ministry, we shall not so much follow the rites of other churches, but rather the rule and apostolic observance of the word of God.”<sup>105</sup> Especially during a period of such chaos and change, having that consistency in his ordinance was crucial to unifying the diverse peoples of the Strangers’ Churches.

Moreover, another important aspect to Łaski’s *Forma Ac Ratio* was its heavy reliance on scripture. Leaving out much to do with local norms, customs and traditions, the *Forma Ac Ratio* was inspired by the original universal Christian literature: “the Minister... [reads] from the Bible... [and] takes care... not to wander too far from [scripture].”<sup>106</sup> This part of Łaski’s work is another value he inherited from Erasmus as Erasmus himself insisted on the use of scripture above anything else: “[Erasmus] wrote movingly and sincerely... about his wish to see the countryman chant the Bible at his plough... [and] even women should read the text. He wanted

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<sup>103</sup> Bryan D. Spinks, “John a Lasco’s ‘Forma Ac Ratio’, 1555,” in *From the Lord and “The Best Reformed Churches”*: A study of eucharistic liturgy in the English Puritan and Separatist traditions, 1550-1633, trans. D. G. Lane (Rome: Edizioni Liturche, 1984), 174.

<sup>104</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 134.

<sup>105</sup> Łaski, *Forma ac ratio*, Pp4. “Cu hac potissimum ratione cura nobis nostræ Ecclesiæ committeretur, ut in illius ministerio, non tam equidem aliaru Ecclesiarum ritus ullos, quam uerbi diuini regulam potius atque apostolica obseruationem sequeremur.” Translated by author with the help of Google Translate.

<sup>106</sup> Spinks, “John a Lasco’s,” 158

to end the excesses of clerical privilege.”<sup>107</sup> In the same vein, Łaski also advocated for this. For instance, on certain days after service, the congregation of a Strangers’ Church would “pass the day [through] praying [and] reading the Scriptures.”<sup>108</sup> In all aspects of his work, Łaski heavily relied on the Bible. As he put it, the *Forma Ac Ratio* would be “called by Grace: to be a divine ordinance in Christ's Church, through Christ the Lord Himself.”<sup>109</sup> Whether it was the structure or practiced rituals, it would be based off scripture in some way.

Overall, it is clear that the *Forma Ac Ratio* was significant in its own right. It was an ordinance that used scripture and the work of past churches to unite many different groups of peoples. And throughout its structure, it remained consistent with the goal of uniting the whole church. But despite this, if the ordinance never reached beyond just Emden and London, it is hard to say it was that significant. Fortunately for the argument of this project, the influence of the *Forma Ac Ratio* reached further than just the British Isles. Although Calvin is usually credited with the spread of Reformed Christianity, “he played no part in... northern Europe’s Reformed Protestantism.”<sup>110</sup> Much of it was actually due to Cranmer, King Edward, John Knox, and of course, Jan Łaski. What’s more is that Łaski’s Reformed influence even reached Eastern Europe. But how did this happen? Along with everything else mentioned, Łaski’s *Forma Ac Ratio* also had the ability to spread fairly easily. Its message and practices were universal in nature as it tried to remain loyal to scripture as much as possible. But another important aspect to Łaski’s work is that it also left room for local traditions. Łaski never wanted to enforce non-Biblical traditions, so he allowed for congregations to “protect their religious autonomy and to

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<sup>107</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 101.

<sup>108</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 118.

<sup>109</sup> Łaski, *Forma ac ratio*, D1. “Primum Superintendentis, seu Inspectoris ministerium, Graci... uocat: esse diuina ordinatione in Christi Ecclesia, per ipsismet Christum Dominum.” Translated by author with the help of Google Translate.

<sup>110</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 267.

maintain their own rites and practices.”<sup>111</sup> Also, Łaski encouraged singing and preaching “in the common tongue.”<sup>112</sup> While the structural and spiritual aspects would be uniform throughout the Strangers’ Churches, some of the smaller aspects could be different. This, in turn, further enabled the Reformed message to spread.

Additionally, through the refugees, many new churches formed in Europe that followed Łaski’s model. Britain was obviously receptive to Łaski’s model, but so too was the Netherlands and parts of Northern Germany. His work truly began to reach further than he personally did: “Although Lasco’s theology did not exercise influence continuously, many churches accepted Lasco’s ecclesiastical order, partly or entirely, in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>113</sup> Also, beyond just Northern Europe, some of these Reformed Churches spread as far as Poland and Hungary. While Calvin is rightly credited with the spread of Reformed Christianity in much of Germany, Switzerland, and France, Łaski (at least partially) was the one to credit for the spread of the religion in Northern Europe and Eastern Europe: “This expansion of Reformed Protestantism without much help from Calvin was not merely to East Friesland or England, but also with spectacular success into eastern Europe, from Poland in the north down through the Hungarian plain.”<sup>114</sup> In particular, Łaski’s works in Poland were even more significant as it was still predominantly Catholic.

However, before elaborating once again on Poland, another instance of unfairness needs to be addressed. Now, obviously, John Calvin is one of the most important figures of the

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<sup>111</sup> Springer, “Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio,” 93.

<sup>112</sup> Spinks, “John a Lasco’s,” 165.

<sup>113</sup> Min Kang, “John Calvin and John a Lasco on Church Order: A Comparative Study with Special Attention to Church Offices” (MA diss., Protestant Theological University, 2011), 44, [https://www.academia.edu/17023815/John\\_Calvin\\_and\\_John\\_a\\_Lasco\\_on\\_Church\\_Order\\_A\\_Comparative\\_Study\\_with\\_Special\\_Attention\\_to\\_Church\\_Offices](https://www.academia.edu/17023815/John_Calvin_and_John_a_Lasco_on_Church_Order_A_Comparative_Study_with_Special_Attention_to_Church_Offices).

<sup>114</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 267.

Reformation. Being one of the key founders of the Reformed Church, his work went on to shape the Reformation and influence millions. But he, alongside many others, is disproportionately discussed in comparison to the Polish reformer. There are mentions of Calvin's *Institutes* in nearly every textbook regarding the Reformation. In James D. Tracy's work, *Europe's Reformations*, *Institutes* alone is mentioned more times than Jan Łaski himself: 4 pages to just one mention in the notes section.<sup>115</sup> And of course, there are countless works that specifically cover Calvin's notable works. But again, the same cannot be said for Jan Łaski. While more recently there have been more contributions to his study, it pales in comparison to the other reformers of his time. In fact, according to Dr. Springer, "there remains a need for a comprehensive study of the *Forma Ac Ratio* and its influence in Europe."<sup>116</sup> While this statement was made nearly 15 years ago, not much has been written since then in terms of dissecting the Pole's unique ordinance.

Nonetheless, despite the continued aversion from Western historiography, the *Forma Ac Ratio* was undoubtedly one of the most significant church ordinances of its time. And it was one of the few organized Protestant ordinances that actually reached Poland. At long last, Łaski would finally be able to impact his home country. By this point in his career, he had developed "friendly correspondence" with King Sigismund II of Poland and Duke Albert of Prussia.<sup>117</sup> He had hoped he could possibly use these two royal figures in trying to convert Poland. Unfortunately for Łaski, Albert ruled a staunchly Lutheran Duchy that was incompatible with his Reformed beliefs. And in his homeland, the pressure from Emperor Charles V was too great for Łaski and Sigismund II to establish any serious Protestant church. However, in 1558, Łaski

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<sup>115</sup> Tracy, *Europe's Reformations*, 86, 94-95, 110, 355, 378-379.

<sup>116</sup> Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio," 12.

<sup>117</sup> Eaves and Carter, "John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer," 314.

returned home regardless. His departure from England was due to the accession of the Catholic Queen, Mary Tudor. And although he searched for years, he did not find another place to continue his theological work. Notably, though, he did travel to Frankfurt in 1555 to meet with Calvin in person for the first time.<sup>118</sup> But inevitably, Łaski had to return home as he had no other options.

While in Poland, Łaski tried to establish his church. The Reformed message had reached Poland, but it was not very well-sustained. There was not a large Protestant following among the peasant population, and only a portion of the nobles converted. This meant that Protestantism did not have a strong grassroots foundation to support it. Also, by the time that Łaski returned, the Counter-Reformation had already begun in Poland. With all of these elements at work, Łaski was ultimately unsuccessful in his efforts to create a unified church in Poland. This became official in 1558 when the Lutherans of Königsberg refused to agree to a “common confession” with Łaski and the Reformed Protestants.<sup>119</sup> Shortly after in 1560, Łaski passed away due to illness and old age. However, before Łaski died, he made one more contribution to the Reformation. After Mary ascended to the throne of England, she obviously put an end to all Protestant projects and churches. Yet, once she lost the throne to Queen Elizabeth in 1558, most of the counter-reform enacted by the Catholic government was quickly undone.<sup>120</sup> This, of course, included the Strangers’ Church. Hearing about the new Protestant Queen, Łaski quickly sent her a letter of congratulations. But within this letter, Łaski also petitioned for the return of his former project, the Strangers’ Church.<sup>121</sup> And to his delight, Queen Elizabeth eventually reinstated the Church.

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<sup>118</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 5.

<sup>119</sup> Rodgers, “À Lasco [Łaski], John,” 6.

<sup>120</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 296.

<sup>121</sup> Eaves and Carter, “John à Lasco: A Polish Religious Reformer,” 321.

While the end of Łaski's life seemingly signaled failure due to his inability to start a lasting church in his home country, the work he did for Reformation had already been cemented. By the point he finally returned to Poland, he had already left his mark on the Reformation and Europe as a whole. His legacy more than outlived his own life. But Łaski's "failure" to set up any lasting unified church in Poland was less of his fault and more of what had been occurring in Poland. By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Counter-Reformation had begun taking effect in Poland. While it was not until the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century that Protestants would be expelled and jailed, the unstable grounds made it hard for any one type of Protestantism to flourish.<sup>122</sup> As has been established earlier, Poland was a very diverse region in Europe. It was composed of many different peoples with various religions and beliefs. If Poland was more homogenized both ethnically and religiously, the Reformation may have been more successful: "A Protestant elite united might have prevailed, but with... thirty-four different [Protestant] sects in Lithuania alone[,]... the... Catholic Church and... traditional religious practice in the countryside proved too formidable to overcome."<sup>123</sup> Also, as Poland was more rural than the other kingdoms to its west, many of its peasants could never hear about Protestantism and convert. While they were "the basis of the Reformation's victory elsewhere," in Poland, the common people actually hindered the movement.<sup>124</sup> While Poland's unique level of tolerance allowed Protestantism to thrive initially, its lack of grassroots support coupled with other factors eventually led to its downfall nearly a century later.

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<sup>122</sup> Brian Porter, "The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 292, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3086330>.

<sup>123</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 373.

<sup>124</sup> Wijachka, "The Reformation in Private Towns," 43.



Moreover, this problem of not having enough grassroots support was further exacerbated in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Catholic monarchs finally decided to take a strong stance against Protestantism. King Sigismund II, who ruled during the early part of the Reformation, was remarkably tolerant: “[T]he spirit of tolerance was as rare a virtue as elsewhere... Kings such as [Sigismund II]... set clear examples of tolerance.”<sup>125</sup> However, after his death in 1572, the succeeding kings became less tolerant of the Protestants. Although the Compact of Warsaw (signed by the nobles in 1573) tried to guarantee religious toleration, it would not last forever.<sup>126</sup> The status quo was more or less maintained throughout the decade and a half after Sigismund II’s death, but everything took a dramatic turn after Sigismund III Vasa ascended to the throne. Originally born a Swede, he was elected to the throne in 1587. Being “a devout Catholic, and firm adherent of the aims of the Counter-Reformation,” Sigismund III personified the transition to Catholicism for the kingdom.<sup>127</sup>

Despite still having all the same limitations as prior kings, Sigismund III brought a renewed Catholic piety to the monarchy. This inevitably caused friction and tension between the Protestant nobility and the Catholic monarch. In particular, in 1605, tensions came to a boiling point when the king married “without the consent of the Sejm.”<sup>128</sup> This was the final straw as the Protestants began to mobilize militarily. They elected the wealthy magnate, Janusz Radziwiłł to be their leader. However, unfortunately for the Protestants, the insurrection was crushed. In 1607, “the confederates were cut to pieces” and defeated by the King’s forces.<sup>129</sup> In a way, this marked the beginning of the end for Protestantism in Poland. Although the nobles who led the

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<sup>125</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 154-155.

<sup>126</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 260.

<sup>127</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 330.

<sup>128</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 261.

<sup>129</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 162.

rebellion faced very little repercussions and were allowed to remain Protestant, they still lost. It was maybe one of the first times in Polish history when the king had fully stood up to the nobility.

Moreover, along with his staunch Catholic position, Sigismund III also possessed strong Jesuit connections. Labeled as the “wretched tool” of the Jesuits by Polish historian Walerian Krasinski, Sigismund III clearly had important ties to the order.<sup>130</sup> This enabled the Jesuits to influence Polish society. In particular, they did an effective job at reinspiring Catholic fervor in the kingdom. Not only did they reinforce the remaining Catholic nobles, but they convinced many former Protestants to convert as well. How they did this, though, was through cunning political strategy. At first, the Jesuits were very pro-monarchy and absolutism as Sigismund III was very friendly with the Jesuits.<sup>131</sup> However, over time, they started to win over many of the nobles including the Protestant ones. This was possible through their infiltration of schools. Although this came with some friction, the Jesuits founded several influential universities. And the most significant one was located in Poland’s largest city of Krakow. This university received papal backing, and it even received royal support from Sigismund III.<sup>132</sup> And along with the other Jesuit-founded universities, the university in Krakow educated many young noblemen. Obviously, peasants and poor townsfolk could not attend universities; only nobles could and did. So, by infiltrating the schools, the Jesuits were able to specifically target and influence the Polish nobility.<sup>133</sup> In turn, this gave them much political clout.

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<sup>130</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 132.

<sup>131</sup> Krzysztof Fordoński and Piotr Urbański, “Jesuit Culture in Poland and Lithuania,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5, (2018): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00503001>.

<sup>132</sup> P. T. Stolarski, “Dominican-Jesuit Rivalry and the Politics of Catholic Renewal in Poland,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62, no. 2 (2011): 259-260, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046909991400>.

<sup>133</sup> Fordoński and Urbański, “Jesuit Culture,” 342.

However, beyond just the Jesuits and pro-Catholic Church monarchs, domestic social change had started occurring in Poland as well. Overall, there was a shift in the perceptions of Protestantism and the Catholic church. While the influence of outside groups helped pushed this further along, the decision to move towards a predominantly Catholic society largely came from within: “Polish Catholicism was marked not so much by its external militancy, as by its extreme inward piety.”<sup>134</sup> All the factors of the Counter-Reformation had coalesced and taken a domestic presence in Poland. And as previously mentioned, the rural peasants and many of the poor townfolk were already very Catholic. As illiteracy and distance from major printing areas made it nearly impossible to learn about Protestantism, these people simply never left the status quo. While in the much more urbanized Western Europe, many of the peasants would end up converting. The peasants in Poland remained as the loyal backbone to the Catholic Church. And once the Protestant nobles lost standing whether through political coercion, disenfranchisement, or reconversion, there was almost nothing left of the Reformation in Poland. In the immediate aftermath, “the Church worked to construct a new Catholic narrative of Poland’s past... to eliminate religious diversity.”<sup>135</sup> The Reformation and Protestantism definitely existed in Poland, but the Catholic Church did an effective job at changing this history.

This altering of Poland’s self-perspective by the Polish Catholic Church is actually a very significant part of this project as it leads to the “why.” One of the main reasons for Poland’s partial absence from Reformation historiography was its own self-perception. There is a common Polish narrative that “the Polish state may have been tolerant of non-Catholics, but... the nation was always faithful.”<sup>136</sup> In essence, this means that the political state of Poland allowed for

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<sup>134</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 132.

<sup>135</sup> Porter, “The Catholic Nation,” 292.

<sup>136</sup> Porter, “The Catholic Nation,” 291.

tolerance in religion, but the majority of Poland's population had always remained loyal to the Latin Church. While there is some truth to this statement, it does drastically downplay the significance of Protestantism in the kingdom during the Reformation. As has been exemplified throughout this project, the Reformation left tangible legacies in Poland-Lithuania.

Furthermore, another aspect to Poland's historiographical exclusion is Western bias. Since at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Western bias, especially in relation to Eastern Europe, has been very well-documented in academia. Put well by historian Henry Roberts, "the very categories of Western historical thought have, along with other influences, been absorbed into Eastern European historiography and historical methodology."<sup>137</sup> Essentially, the way many historians view Eastern European history is through the lens of a Westerner. Roberts continues to state that Western Europe is sort of used as a constant in history. Basically, Western Europe is the status quo, and the East is compared to it: "Western European history and culture have come to serve as a basis for comparison, as a kind of measuring rod, whether the comparison be regarded as favorable or unfavorable."<sup>138</sup> While this is obviously unfair to Eastern Europe, to undo it would probably take years of conscious rewriting to the historiography. But at least so far as this project has proved, this has not happened yet. Many of the Reformation textbooks cited throughout the project give an extremely limited Polish account or none at all. A pleasant exception to this, though, was Diarmaid MacCulloch's, *The Reformation*. This textbook included

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<sup>137</sup> Henry L. Roberts, "Eastern Europe and the Historian," *Slavic Review* 20, no. 3 (1961): 512, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3000512>.

<sup>138</sup> Roberts, "Eastern Europe," 512.

much more than the average on topics like Jan Łaski, Polish history, and Poland in the Reformation in general.<sup>139</sup>

Unfortunately, though, MacCulloch's work is just an exception. Although it is easy to spot this bias, solving it is the hard part. Even in Poland itself, Western bias is increasingly pervasive: "there has been much stress upon a Western identification, with correspondingly heavy emphasis upon those cultural features, such as Roman Catholicism, which would highlight that identity."<sup>140</sup> However, more than just Catholicism and Western influence, the period of communist rule also played a part in making Poland's historiography trickier to study. Obviously, the period of communist rule essentially cut all Westerners off from Eastern Europe. This meant that studying their history would have been difficult to do physically. There would not have been significant access to communist nations' archives and historical documents. But in Poland specifically, communism tried to change the fabric of the nation. The Catholic identity built by the Church over the course of centuries was shaken under communist rule. Many today claim Poland was always Catholic, but during the Cold War there were many attempts "to write Catholicism out of Polish history altogether."<sup>141</sup> With both the Catholic Church and communist rule trying to change Polish history, combined with Western bias, Poland's true part in the historiographical narrative of the Reformation becomes hard to track.

Additionally, these problems are further exacerbated by the worldwide usage of English. This may seem less obvious than the other problems because it is relatively simple. However, Poland's difficulty with English may be an important part of its infrequent mentioning in

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<sup>139</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 45, 48, 55-56, 68, 97-98, 162-163, 190-192, 247, 254-259, 261, 265-266, 268-269, 290, 293, 294, 310, 317-320, 340-344, 358, 360-365, 460, 463, 483, 500, 524-5, 549, 558, 564, 584, 616, 660, 670, 672, 676, 678, 693-694, 835, 843-844.

<sup>140</sup> Roberts, "Eastern Europe," 512.

<sup>141</sup> Porter, "The Catholic Nation," 297.

Western historical circles. According to Dr. Kamil Luczaj, English is “a universal academic lingua franca,” but it comes with many negatives.<sup>142</sup> Poland as a modern-day nation is actually quite proficient in its usage of English. According to the English Proficiency Index, in 2022 Poland ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in English proficiency out of 111 non-English speaking countries.<sup>143</sup> So, considering its high level of proficiency, why are they still hampered by the usage of English? The answer to this lies within the usage of English in high-level academic settings. Going back to Dr. Luczaj’s study, he states that “fluency in English is not a guarantee of effective communication with the Polish academic community, neither with the administration nor with other scholars and students.”<sup>144</sup> Relating this back to the main point of the project, English’s lack of viability in the Polish academic setting would mean that Polish historiographies could be ignored by other Western historical circles. While furthering the use of English could mitigate this problem, it could also further diminish the value of the Polish language. This is explained by Luczaj when he essentially states that articles written in the Polish language are less valuable than those in English: “The current research evaluation system is largely based on the Scopus metrics, which makes Polish-language... papers far less valuable than English-language papers.”<sup>145</sup> Overall, Western bias and changing self-perception coupled with Poland’s problem with English greatly sets back the West’s appreciation for Polish history, especially in relation to the Reformation.

Finally, now that the question of why has been answered, this project can return to Łaski and Poland. Regardless of the apparent failure of the Reformation in Poland, its effects and

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<sup>142</sup> Kamil Luczaj, “English as a lingua franca? The limits of everyday English-language communication in Polish academia,” *English for Specific Purposes* 66, (2022): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2021.11.002>.

<sup>143</sup> “The world’s largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills,” *English Proficiency Index*, 2023, <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>.

<sup>144</sup> Luczaj, “English as a lingua franca,” 12.

<sup>145</sup> Luczaj, “English as a lingua franca,” 13.

contributions were nonetheless important to the overall history of Europe. It is true that Protestantism did not stay very long in Poland, but it still transformed the country. Poland entered the Reformation as a tolerant and open kingdom whose unique political structure gave rights to many minority groups. But in the Reformation's aftermath nearly a century and a half later, Poland became fervently Catholic and religiously homogenous. To say that the Reformation had no effect is to be blind to the actual history of the region. Again, it is objectively true that Protestantism did not last as long in Poland as it did in certain German states or Scandinavia, but it still played a significant part in the religious politics of the time. For several centuries (including those leading up the Reformation), Poland was the most tolerant European kingdom. However, after the Polish Catholic Church regained ground and consolidated power, this all changed. Poland went from an open and diverse kingdom that did not possess any single unifying aspect to a kingdom whose identity was built off Catholicism and Catholicism alone.<sup>146</sup> This fact on its own should warrant closer study by Western historians as it shows just how much the Reformation affected Poland.

However, beyond just this, Poland's unique cultural framework that enabled many aspects of the Reformation also deserves further study. As has been stated, the level of toleration granted in Poland allowed for many humanist and Protestant ideas to enter the kingdom and evolve. But, during the Reformation at its height, Poland was religiously tolerant almost to a fault: "official tolerance made it impossible for Protestantism to institutionalize its success."<sup>147</sup> As Protestantism was able to spread freely without any significant royal or ducal backing, there became too many sects. In essence, it spread itself thin and could not unify. So, once the Catholic

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<sup>146</sup> Porter, "The Catholic Nation," 292.

<sup>147</sup> Porter, "The Catholic Nation," 291.

Church regained ground, the various small, divided Protestant Churches stood no chance. Without the support of a central figure (whether it be royalty or powerful religious authority), Polish Protestants had no ability to defend their religion against the Counter-Reformation. Again, what can be seen as a region unaffected by the Reformation (Poland started Catholic and returned to being Catholic) was actually a kingdom whose loose religious and political structure brought about its fall and retransformation. Again, this is another interesting part of Poland's history that has not yet been fully dissected in the West.

Furthermore, on the aspect of print, this too is unjustly underdiscussed. Although Poland's printing industry was small in comparison to that of Germany, France, or the Netherlands, it was still surprisingly strong. Although it too was eventually taken over by the Catholic Church, the industry was extremely important during the Reformation. However, this fact can be hard to see in some cases because of how the Catholic Church monopolized the Polish print industry. For context, in the decades after the Counter-Reformation, many pro-Catholic works were printed instead of pro-Protestant ones. Between 1563 (the year that the Council of Trent disbanded) and 1640, editions by Jesuit scholar Piotr Skarga alone were printed 61 times.<sup>148</sup> To compare, in this same time frame, there were only 3 editions by Calvin and 2 by Luther.<sup>149</sup> So, prior to the Catholic Church conquering the printing press, the Polish Protestants depended on it to spread and receive Protestant thought. Poland was on the edge of the Reformation, but it still contributed to it. And while printing helps show this, nothing demonstrated it as much as the Polish Reformers.

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<sup>148</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Piotr Skarga."

<sup>149</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Luther."; Universal Short Title Catalogue, "Calvin."



Even more important than Poland's printing industry and unique social and political framework were the people that came out of it. Jan Łaski was one of the most significant reformers of his time, and his legacy more than outlived his own life. Thanks to his work and influence, the Reformed Church was able to grow and spread as far as Transylvania and Poland.<sup>150</sup> His work, the *Forma Ac Ratio*, inspired many congregations and gave them instructions on how to form a church. Regardless of nationality or language, hundreds and possibly even thousands of congregations were touched by the work of the Polish reformer.<sup>151</sup> His life's accomplishments may be played down in many historical textbooks, but his legacy demonstrates his true significance. Especially in the modern day, Łaski is not only significant solely due to his works. He and his life are especially important when studying the Reformation today because of where he was from. Many of the commonly referenced reformers were from areas in Western Europe. For instance, Bucer, Melancthon, Zwingli, and more were all from German-speaking countries. Cranmer and Hooper were from England, and Calvin was from France. Łaski not only breaks this "mold" so to speak but he breaks it enough to be more than just a "token" Eastern European. Many have tried to put him in this role in Western historiography, but it is clear he was much more than just that.

However, although it is far from ideal, Jan Łaski is at least mentioned in scholarly works about the Reformation. Many others are not referenced ever or only rarely in specific works. For instance, Mikołaj Radziwiłł was another important reformer in Poland. He was a wealthy noble and later Chancellor of Lithuania who lived during the same time as Łaski. However, unlike Łaski, Radziwiłł was actually Lithuanian. Nonetheless, he provided much political and financial

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<sup>150</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 267.

<sup>151</sup> Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio," 2.

support to the Polish Reformation, and he even had some foreign influence. After the accession of Queen Mary to the throne, Mikołaj Radziwiłł allowed the “vigorously Protestant” Duchess Catherine of Suffolk to take residence in Lithuania.<sup>152</sup> Although he never really had the continent-wide reach that Łaski did, Radziwiłł’s work in Poland still warrants more appreciation. Not only was the Radziwiłł family significant simply due to their sheer political power (Mikołaj’s cousin, Barbara, was the queen at one point), but many of them were also staunch Protestants like Mikołaj.<sup>153</sup> Yet Mikołaj’s dedication to Protestantism was more than just political and financial support; it was academic as well. For instance, he helped publish the first Polish language Bible in Poland, the Brest Bible.<sup>154</sup> While this was purposefully done in the name of the Protestant Reformation, a Bible in Polish was significant in general. This expanded access to the Bible to those who could only understand Polish.

Additionally, another important Protestant figure who has not received much attention in many scholarly works was Mikołaj Rej. Born in 1505, he was an influential Polish poet. While he was not strictly a reformer like Łaski or Radziwiłł, it is important to note that he was still a Protestant. His career further demonstrates the Reformation’s effect on Poland as he was a well-known writer during the time. According to the Universal Short Title Catalogue, between 1540 and 1585, Mikołaj Rej had 39 editions of his works printed or reprinted in Poland.<sup>155</sup> On its own, this was an impressive feat. But what makes even more significant is that most of Rej’s works were printed in Polish. A stark contrast from the prevailing use of Latin, Rej wanted to use Polish to “[l]et the neighbouring nations know that Poles... have their own language.”<sup>156</sup> Not

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<sup>152</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 273.

<sup>153</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 167-168.

<sup>154</sup> Davies, *God’s Playground*, 143.

<sup>155</sup> Universal Short Title Catalogue, “Mikołaj Rej.”

<sup>156</sup> Mączak, “Poland,” 184.

only was he was an influential Protestant, but Rej was also significant for furthering the academic use of Polish. The work done by figures like him, Łaski, and Radziwiłł deserves more attention from modern historians. Unfortunately, though, this is obviously not the case.

As this project has proven, Poland's impact on the Reformation was greater than just being an insignificant observer. The kingdom of Poland and many of its subjects were active participants in the religious and political changes occurring in Europe. New ideas and beliefs came into the country and were spread even further by Poland's printing industry. As has been stated many times, this was all made possible by Poland's unique social and political structure. Unlike many kingdoms to its west, Poland had a weak monarch. Not that the king was powerless but simply he was kept in check by the power of the nobles. Both the aristocrats and lower nobility controlled much of what the kingdom did. So, this enabled them to protect Protestantism for many decades. The vast kingdom that was Poland-Lithuania almost became the largest Protestant country of its time. However, this became a hypothetical as the Counter-Reformation greatly changed Poland and its nobility. To the chagrin of Łaski and many other Polish Protestants, Catholicism eventually took over the kingdom. The once tolerant and diverse nation that gave many opportunities to minority groups became incredibly strict and authoritarian. The kingdom that once lacked any single unifying trait had become unified through the Catholic Church alone.

In conclusion, while studies on the topic have improved in recent years, there is still a long way to go before Poland's history gets the fair attention it deserves. This will be a difficult step forward as many factors such as bias, historical revisionism, and language barriers get in the way, but it is not an impossible feat. Giving this topic the attention it deserves is important because it will help paint a clearer picture of the European Reformation at large. For example, as

previously stated, the full effect of the *Forma Ac Ratio* has still barely been studied.<sup>157</sup> And like his work, Łaski himself is another aspect that demands further studying. His reach and influence were significant in their own right. However, as he was Polish, his life's work is made all the more significant. Łaski, like many other parts of Polish history, deserves to be referred to outside of a Western context. While it is an unfair description, it is accurate to say that Western historiography (the historiography of English-speaking academics in Western Europe and North America) depicts Łaski almost as a token Eastern European. Many discuss him like he was simply another eclectic figure recruited by Archbishop Cranmer. However, as this project has proven, Łaski was more than just a secondary figure in the Reformation. He was a prominent and important reformer who brought much change to areas of Europe that other figures could not reach. And beyond just the reformer, Poland as a whole deserves more accuracy and attention from the West. Simply ignoring a country's history because it was on the "outside" is not fair or even very logical. To give a full account, every perspective needs to be taken. History relies on those who pursue the whole story and not just a version of it. So, to conclude with a final, simple statement: Poland was not just an observer of history; it was an active participant in creating it.

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<sup>157</sup> Springer, "Church Building and the Forma ac Ratio," 3.

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