In September, 1620, at the Moldavian village of Cecora on the Prut River, the Polish and Ottoman armies met to fight a battle that marked the beginning of the war. The first encounter with the enemy was not fortunate for the Polish side, whose troops were routed and commanders either killed or held captive. The news of the defeat, quite naturally, threw Poland into a panic. Facing the pitiful shortage of resources and of soldiers who could be raised in the country and sent against the Turks, King Sigismund III and the Sejm, towards the end of 1620, decided to send embassies to the European powers in order to arouse their interest in the precarious situation of the Commonwealth and ask for help. One of the Polish ambassadors was Jerzy Ossoliński, whose assignment was to go to England and plead with King James I for aid.2

This was, on the surface, a rather curious idea. After all England was then the leader of European Protestantism, and as such could hardly be considered a suitable partner and ally for a country pursuing radically pro-Catholic and pro-Hapsburg policies, especially at a time when the Thirty Years’ War was gaining momentum. Furthermore, taking into consideration England’s secure geographical location and its natural isolationism one could barely assume that it would have been concerned with the Turkish invasion of a distant central European country.3 However, as it turned out, not only did King James take a lively interest in the Polish pleas, but also decided to contribute, although in an admittedly limited way, to the defence of the Commonwealth against the Ottomans. The reasons for cooperation between the two

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1 The Polish-Turkish war of 1620–1 was in fact merely a resumption of the conflict temporarily suspended by the truce of 1617. The causus belli was the Turks’ impatience with constant attacks on Black Sea towns made by the Cossacks, who—as was taken for granted—were incited by the Poles. Other reasons for the war included the Polish nobles’ notorious interference in Moldavia, Wallachia, Transylvania and Hungary, the territories that lay in the Ottoman Empire’s sphere of influence.


3 The Turks themselves admitted that England “lies so far off that she could never be touched by the forces of the Sultan,” CSPV, X, p. 477.
seemingly unlikely allies were varied and largely unanticipated, however, the critical factor was King James himself and his staunch adherence to the ancient concept of Christendom which resulted in his attitude towards the Turks.

Contrary to appearances, appealing to the English court was not unreasonable at all. First, it was still remembered that an English monarch had already been involved in the conflict between Poland and Turkey. Three decades before, in 1590, the late Queen Elizabeth I, through her ambassador in Constantinople, Edward Barton, successfully helped to end the war between Turkey and Poland. The precedent for English mediation in Polish-Turkish relations having thus been set, King Sigismund, just before the outbreak of the new war, asked James to intervene in Constantinople on behalf of Poland. He was not disappointed. The English ambassador, instructed by James, delivered the royal letter that exhorted the Sultan to peace and announced he would help Poland in case of an attack. Although this time the English diplomatic action had no effect, it was a clear signal that King James was willing to side with Poland.

Ossoliński’s letters show that the Polish ambassador was absolutely certain that his mission to England would be a success. His boundless optimism, hardly becoming of a diplomat, however, did have some foundation. It was not only James’s recent diplomatic intervention in favour of the Commonwealth and his predecessors’ efforts that made

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1 In his letter of 30 Jan. 1592 to Elizabeth the Grand Signor, Murad III, wrote, “the King of Poland having violated the treaties between us, war was declared on him. His country was put to fire and sword, and ruined. He sent Ambassadors to sue for peace, which was refused. But your Ambassador here resident has, in your name, expressed your great desire that peace should be granted to the King of Poland; therefore to satisfy you, we have yielded to your Ambassador’s request . . .” CSPV, IX, p. 20.

5 Entries for June, 1620. CSPV, XVI, pp. 436, 463.

6 Furthermore, Ossoliński was not the first Polish envoy sent to James’s court. As early as 1603 Stanisław Cikowski went to London to congratulate the new English monarch on his accession and obtain permission to recruit 8,000 infantry and to hire 20 ships. Frost, “Scottish Soldiers, Poland-Lithuania and the Thirty Years’ War,” p. 198. In September, 1619 James Butler, an Irishman serving in Poland managed to return from the British Isles with some troops, and in 1620, just before the battle at Cecora, Sir Arthur Aston and Thomas Buck were sent from Warsaw to England to recruit troops. Borowy, “Anglicy, Szkoci i Irlandczycy w wojsku polskim za Zygmunta III,” pp. 299–301; Biegatka, “Zołnierze szkoccy w dawnej Rzeczpospolitej,” pp. 92–95, 101.

7 Cf. Ossoliński’s letters to the royal secretary, Jakub Zadzik (22 Feb. 1621) and the chancellor, Andrzej Lipski, in Ossoliński, Pamiętnik (1595–1621), pp. 138–39, 161.

8 Ossoliński’s self-confidence might be also ascribed to his youth and lack of experience. He was only 25 and it was his first diplomatic assignment.