

The Battle of Grunwald By: *Militiades Varvounis and Saiva Ziogaite*

It was 1226 when the Polish Duke of Mazowsze, Konrad Mazowiecki invited the Palestine - based Teutonic Order into the lands of Chelmno, on the river Wisła (Vistula), expecting the Order's help in their struggles against pagan Prussians.

Grand Master Hermann von Salza had brought his first German knights to Poland that same year, with the presumed intention of staying a year or two. Nearly two hundred years later they owned most of the Baltic coast, including the lands of Latvia and Estonia, and showed every intention of soon controlling Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

The Teutonic Knights achieved excellent diplomatic relations with other western countries, and developed a particularly good relationship with the papacy. They seemed destined to control and occupy the whole of Eastern Europe, and acted under a commission signed by the Pope, ordering them to Christianize the pagan lands in the Baltic Region. No matter how they behaved, they could always claim that they acted under Papal authority, and with the approval of God Himself.

Their first Christianizing mission in the 13th century involved the Prussians, a tribe which controlled the amber trade along the Baltic. The Teutonic knights dealt with them in a most effective way: they eliminated them almost completely. Those who remained alive were forbidden to marry so that no further Prussian children would be forthcoming. Centuries later, when Prussia was a proud and famous name among Europeans, there was hardly a true Prussian alive, and the archaic Prussian language slowly died out under Teutonic occupation.

The Teutonic Knights continued their occupations and captured Pomorze (1308-1309), Chelmno, Kujawa, Dobrzyn, and Kalisz in Poland. Every time Polish land was captured, the population was massacred, and Germans were brought to live in the captured lands. For example, in 1308 when the knights marched on Gdańsk singing "Jesu Christo Salvator Mundi" they killed most of the Polish citizens, about ten thousand in number, and replaced them with German immigrants, who gave them full allegiance. That same year the biggest, most powerful fort in Europe was finished, Malbork - built by the Knights in the occupied Prussian area.

The 14th century Order's attacks were mainly against the pagan Lithuanian State, combining the mission to spread Christianity, and the desire to capture Lithuanian lands. The Knights of the Teutonic Order needed reinforcements to fight effectively in this region. Well-armed knights from France, England, Luxembourg, Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and the Low Countries arrived every year to participate in "Lithuanian Crusades". Although these mercenaries were never allowed to become full members of the Teutonic Order, they were granted an honourable affiliation and fought alongside the Teutonic Knights. For two centuries, the Krzyżacy attacked, but the Lithuanians resisted hard.

In 1385 Lithuania entered into a union with the Polish Kingdom, and the following year The Grand Duke of Lithuania, Vladyslav Jogaila, married the Queen of Poland and acceded to the Polish throne. He became a Christian, and changed his name to Władysław Jagiełło.

Jagiełło brought Christianity to the last pagan European country, Lithuania in 1387. It was understood by both nations that only by uniting, could they handle the powerful Knights.

In 1401 Jagiełło left the title of Grand Duke of Lithuania to his cousin Vytautas the Great, so that he (Jagiełło), could be free to concentrate on Polish affairs. King Jagiełło and Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas the Great (Witold) had difficulty in reconciling with the occupation of their lands, the massacres of innocent citizens in villages near the Polish-Lithuanian-Teutonic borders. They were also conscious that the Order was gaining power year by year, preparing to conquer Eastern Europe. In 1398 the Teutonic knights invaded Lithuanian and Polish territory, and a cold war started between the Polish-Lithuanian State and the Teutonic Order.

The Poles and Lithuanians realised they were not strong enough to oppose the terror which the knights visited on the far fringes of their land, and had to bear the invasions and insults in silence.

On 14 August 1409, Teutonic Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen declared war on the Polish-Lithuanian State. He also proposed an armistice with his neighbours, as neither side was ready for war. The truce was to last from 8 October 1409 until sunset on 24 June 1410. Both sides understood that a titanic battle would follow.

In the meantime Jagiełło sent some of his own people to Kiev, seeking help from the Tartars, who agreed to send 1500 cavalrymen. The Bohemians would send 3000 men under the leadership of Jan Sokol, and help would also come from Moldova and Russia.

Eleven days before the armistice was due to end, the Polish forces were surprised by the arrival of three Teutonic Knights seeking to speak with King Jagiełło, proposing to him that the armistice should be extended for three weeks because knights from other nations of Europe wished to participate in the crusade, and that honour should not be denied to them. Jagiełło accepted!

Soon Jagiello and Vytautas the Great with their armies started moving towards the enemy. On 13 July the Polish-Lithuanians reached the city of Dąbrowno, occupied by the Krzyżacy, and now populated by German citizens. Within a few hours of storming the city, the Poles and Lithuanians captured it. No defending Crusader managed to survive. They were all killed. So strong was the hate for the Krzyżacy, and the feeling of revenge in the army of Poles and Lithuanians, that the town was totally burned, in the full knowledge that this would be seen by Krzyżacy who were kilometres away, following the army of Vytautas and his cousin. The fire and heavy smoke was seen that night by the Grand Master and his army, who observed that Dąbrowno had been captured and burned, and he predicted that a wild battle could not be avoided? We should not let them cross our borders, said one Crusader Commander to his Grand Master? The Krzyżacy watched the town burn without saying anything.

The huge army of Poles and Lithuanians left Dąbrowno and reached Lake Lubien. The Grand Master found the army of Jagiełło and Vytautas, and planned to oppose the enemy, on Tuesday 15 July, at the villages of Grunwald, Stebark and Lodwigowo near Lake Lubien. The land around here was heavily forested with wood suitable for concealing the Polish-Lithuanian army.

When the sun rose on that fateful day, 15 July, one could have imagined all Europe holding its breath to see who would win the titanic battle that had so long been expected. Everyone understood its tremendous significance, since the winner would occupy all of Eastern Europe.

The Krzyżacy positioned their headquarters near the little village of Grunwald, while some three miles distant, the Polish and Lithuanian Commanders had their headquarters near to the equally small village of Stebark (Tannenberg).

When the priest finished on the Polish-Lithuanian side, Jagiełło spoke to the Commanders: "Brothers, we move this day to end the tyranny which has oppressed our lands. The Krzyżacy will come against us with the blessing of the church, and the cross of Christ upon their bosoms. But they also come clothed in lies. We ride forth with trust in our banner, and the deep love of Jesus Christ as our shield. To Freedom! To victory!"

Soon a Commander asked the King when they would move into a battle position, and the King simply replied: - "We don't" Jagiełło provided a formidable army of 50.000 comprised of knights, retainers, and foot soldiers, from Poland, Lithuania, Tartars, Bohemians, Russians, Moravians and Moldavians who came to help the Polish-Lithuanian State. But only a precious few were heavy cavalry. Most of the Lithuanian and Polish foot soldiers were armed with clubs, and their equipment was inferior to that of the Krzyżacy.

The Krzyżacy could assemble that day 21.000 excellent heavy cavalrymen, 6000 massively armed infantry, and 5000 servants trained in battle, and better-armed than most of the Lithuanian and Polish foot soldiers. Most of these Krzyżacy would be Teutonic Knights/Germans, but from all Western Europe knights had come to help their brothers against the "pagan" Lithuanians (some of them were indeed still pagans), and the Poles who dared to support the pagans instead of the Christians. English, French, Hungarians, Austrians,

Bavarians, Thuringians Luxembourgiens, Flamands,, Dutch, Bohemians, and even some Poles would help the Teutonic Knights, but the Grand Master had expected more help from western Europe. The Krzyżacy had 100 cannons capable of throwing balls larger than a head, while the Polish-Lithuanians had only 16 cannons.

The Poles and Lithuanians had another problem. The Germans had the best field leaders in the world - men tested in many battles with Lithuanians and Tartars. Ulrich von Jungingen as Grand Master, Frederick von Wallenrode as Grand Marshal, Kuno von Lichtenstein, one of the finest swordsmen of the century, as Grand Commander, and Albrecht von Schwarzenberg, a marshal serving as Commander of Supply. Each of these men wore a full suit of armour like most of the Krzyżacy. This was of the chain-link type, and not the massive plates favoured by the Poles and Lithuanians.

Although outnumbered in bodies, (more than 50.000 Poles, Lithuanians and Allies to 32.000 Krzyżacy - mostly Germans), the Krzyżacy were vastly superior in armour, horses, and experience and in battlefield leadership. This was going to be one of the most decisive battles of the world, and of all times - an immense clash of arms which would determine the history of Eastern Europe and the destiny of the two emerging nations, Lithuania and Poland.

By 5 o' clock in the morning of 15 July, massed Krzyżacy with flags and huge horses dressed in white could be seen waiting on the horizon, but no Poles and Lithuanians appeared to oppose them. It was an amazing sight. Never in previous battles could anyone have seen such a formidable army, all dressed in white, wearing helmets, brandishing swords, and flying huge flags.

At 6 o'clock the sun rose. Three Polish Champions went to meet the King and requested permission to lead the army in an attack against the Krzyżacy. "No!" Was the answer of the King, and then he revealed his strategy: "Let them wait there in the hot sun. Let them wait all morning while we stay here among the cool trees. When they are exhausted by the heat and lack of water, only then do we engage them in battle."

The three Polish Champions, including the formidable knight Zawisza Czarny (Black Zawisza), known on many battlefields as the premier knight of the east, were impatient, and did not like their King's strategy. But when the sun became hotter and hotter, they understood their King's wisdom in staying in the forest, while the Krzyżacy in full armour were "burned" by the hot sun. In the meantime Vytautas the Great was checking the regiments/flags of Lithuanians, Poles, Bohemians, Russians etc and with his strong voice, gave morale to the soldiers. Vytautas did not like to wait, since the Krzyżacy, according to spies, had marched more than 25 km in heavy rain the previous day, to reach and block the enemy at Grunwald. The Krzyżacy would be tired, and one attack in the early hours of the morning could have crushed the exhausted Krzyżacy, but Jagiełło considered that making them wait in the heat of the day would make the Krzyżacy nervous, and irritable. It was known that Krzyżacy in the past on many battlefields of Europe, won battles because of their psychology and clear mind.

At 8.30, when the Krzyżacy were dripping with sweat, Grand Master von Jungingen engaged in a super manoeuvre, sending two of his finest knights to the opposing side with a clever purpose. When the two knights reached about twenty yards from the Poles, one of them cried in a loud voice: "Lithuanian and Poles, Dukes Vytautas and Jagiełło, if you are afraid to come out and fight, our Grand Master sends you these additional weapons." And with contempt they threw their swords, point down, into the earth, where they quivered. "Also, you cowardly ones, if you feel you require more room for your manoeuvres, the Grand Master says that he will now withdraw our troops one mile to aid you." And suddenly from a signal by one of the knights, the Krzyżacy on the distant field did turn about and retreat a full mile.

The insult made warriors like Black Zawisza angry, but Jagiełło remained unperturbed and sent one of his aides to recover the swords. Brandishing one, he said: "I accept both your swords and your choice of battleground, but the outcome of this day I entrust to the will of God". At this challenge the heralds withdrew.

On the left side, there were Poles, Bohemians, Moravians and Moldavians. On the right side Vytautas the Great had a Tartar platoon, Russian troops and his Lithuanian knights. The foot soldiers, along with the Poles, were hidden in the trees. The Krzyżacy were conventionally opposed to the Polish-Lithuanians. They just had a line of cannon and infantry at the front of their lines.

Jagiello suddenly gave the signal to attack "Krakow-Vilnius," and soon a strong voice "Lietuva" came out like the roar of a lion from the mouth of Vytautas the Great. Many voices and horses were heard as the Lithuanians, Russians and Tartars started to move forward to the first line of Krzyżacy. The Krzyżacy' cannon only managed to fire twice against the mainly light, and of course quick, cavalry. Soon Vytautas' knights reached the line with very few casualties, since they were cleverly spaced so as not to be too close to each other, and brought chaos to the Krzyżacy infantry. Von Jungingen, seeing the failure of his cannons and infantrymen to stop the Lithuanians, immediately ordered some of his cavalry to be sent to engage the Lithuanians. "Our cavalrymen will run down our own men Sire!" von Wallenrode told his Grand Master. Attack the Lithuanians! shouted angry von Jungingen, without considering his foot soldiers, and soon the horsemen started advancing towards the enemy. The unlucky foot soldiers, trying to escape from the enemy, saw sand rising from the horses of the heavy cavalry, and were taken by surprise. From behind, the Lithuanians and Tartars were chasing them, and as they ran back towards their own rear lines, the mounted Krzyżacy were coming directly at them. Soon most of the infantrymen were trampled to death by the horses. Those who were more afraid of the cavalry turned back and found death from the Lithuanians. The first line of the Krzyżacy infantry was almost wiped out. A few foot soldiers managed to escape and hide in the Krzyżacy tents, but most of them who were massed in the middle, pressed by the cavalrymen, did not survive.

It was a clever manoeuvre by Jagiełło and Vytautas the Great, to throw only their mainly light cavalry against the cannons, to eliminate them, and prevent them causing problems for the heavy Polish cavalry. It also forced the Krzyżacy to commit their heavy cavalrymen so soon to the battle.

But now things have changed. When the Tartars looked up the hill and saw giant horses and equally giant Krzyżacy coming towards them, they fled, leaving the Lithuanians and Russians alone. It was a chaotic and undisciplined retreat, and some Krzyżacy followed them, cheering and shouting battle cries. After a chase of four miles, when more than 50 Tartars had been killed, the Krzyżacy returned to their fellows who were fighting with the Lithuanians, but they were engaged in an entirely different kind of battle.

Soon the Grand Master sent a large force of Krzyżacy to the battle, to engage the Polish knights who were waiting on the other side. Trumpets sounded. Cheers rose. And the Polish knights waited for the savage charge of the Krzyżacy who came over a slight rise waving their banners and singing "Christ has risen" as they came against the "Pagans"...

The right side of the Poles also started to move slowly, and they sang Ojczysta Pieśń (their homeland song) "Bogurodzice" (God's Mother). Both sides, with flags flying, and the sounds shouting and singing, came to join the wild battle that the Lithuanians and Krzyżacy were engaged in.

The battle was furious. The incessant clash of swords was like the rolling of thunder across a field. Horses whinnied and went down, throwing their masters under the hooves of other horses, and a wild confused and terrible hand-to-hand battle raged inconclusively for nearly half an hour. The reserve regiments of Allies and Krzyżacy, with terror in their eyes, could see dust rising to the sky, nonstop voices of men, horses, helmets, swords, prayers, understanding how terrible was that battle without mercy. When Kuno von Lichtenstein fought clear against the side of the Lithuanians, and rejoined his Grand Master, who was watching the battle from his quarter said: "The Tartars proved craven, but those damned Lithuanians have learned to fight. It is going to be a fierce battle to the end, Sire".

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