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THE GDAŃSK LANDSKNECHTS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 16TH CENTURY AND THEIR ARMS AND ARMOUR

The participation of German landsknechts in the Gdańsk War of 1576-1577 is well known to researchers. On 17th of April, 1577, in the Battle of Lubieszów three thousand German infantrymen led by the famous defender of Magdeburg Hans Winckelbruch von Köln were unable to withstand the Hungarian footmen and Polish Hussars¹. The history of Gdańsk enlisted troops is, however much longer and goes back to the first half of the sixteenth century.

Traditionally good relations between Polish King Sigismund the Old with Gdańsk started to deteriorate in the 1540s. In contrast to the nobility, who were *polonizing* themselves and wanted to be more closely united with the Polish Crown, the Protestant city councils of Prussian towns wanted to limit the freedom of Polish people mainly through making it difficult for Catholics to acquire municipal rights. All the opponents of the incorporation of Prussia were centered around Gdańsk. Language conflicts were also aggravated². The city authorities were becoming more and more reluctant to pay taxes. In their opinion, the money was needed for, among other things, fortifying the city, which was very expensive. The city's military costs rose from 103 marks in 1530 to 2404 marks in 1550³. They included not only the fortification works but also the pay of the municipal enlisted crew commanded by German, not Polish commanders.

¹ S. Herbst [in:] *Zarys dziejów wojskowości polskiej do roku 1864 (An Outline of the History of the Polish Military Science to the Year 1864)*, vol. I, Warsaw 1965, pp. 386-395; F. Kudelka, *Bitwa pod Lubieszowem 17.IV.1577 (The Battle of Lubieszów 17 April 1577)*, "Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności", Wydział Historyczno-Filozoficzny, XVII, Cracow 1884.

² S. Herbst, *Świadomość narodowa na ziemiach pruskich w XV-XVII w. (The National Consciousness on Prussian Territory in the 15th-17th Centuries)*, "Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie", 1962, No. 1, pp. 6-9; M. Biskup [in:] *Historia Pomorza (The History of Pomerania)*, ed. G. Labuda, vol. II, part I, Poznań 1976, p. 122; J. Tazbir, *Rzeczpospolita i świat (The Polish Commonwealth and the World)*, Wrocław 1971, pp. 99 seqq.

³ W. Hahlweg, *Das Kriegswesen der Stadt Danzing, B. I, Berlin 1937, p. 177.*

When, in the year 1552, Sigismund Augustus attempted to appoint Rafal Dzialynski, the starost of Brodnica, the commander of the city, the city council definitely rejected this candidate. The commander of the city's military forces, responsible for inspecting the fortifications remained Mayor Jan von Werden⁴. At first, in the Gdańsk crew there were only loose groups of landsknechts, who, looking for profits, reached as far as east-Baltic cities. They also joined the forces of Prussian Prince Albrecht Hohenzollern, especially after the Schmalkalden War of 1546-1547 had ended. However, the most numerous groups of German warriors became part of Teutonic forces in Livonia, which was the main area of rivalry between Poland, Lithuania and Ducal Prussia, fighting on one side, and the Grand Duchy of Moscow.

In February 1556, Commander Fellina, Wilhelm Fürstenberg, the Polish King's fierce enemy and a supporter of an agreement with Moscow, was elected coadjutor of the Order of the Brothers of the Sword.

The Order's own forces were too weak compared with the power of King Sigismund Augustus. Therefore Fürstenberg began by sending the Dyneburg commander Gothard Kettler to Germany in order to enlist warriors, especially foot landsknechts. Kettler is said to have enlisted almost 10 thousand men, including 4 thousand infantrymen from Saxony⁵. In May 1556, the first four companies of landsknechts (about 2 thousand soldiers) were shipped from Lübeck to Estonia, which caused a sensation among the locals. According to the Livonian chronicler B. Russow, "na knechtów niemieckich w zbrojach, z mieczmi u boku i długimi pikami tak sie wszyscy szlachta, chłopi, kobiety, sluzba przypatrywali, jakoby na cudo jakies

⁴ The State Archives in Gdańsk (further cited as APG) 300, 53, vol. 452, No. 33.

⁵ "Biblioteka Kórnicka" No. 263 k [leaf] 127v.-128.

morskie...” (“all the people: that is to say, the nobles, peasants, women and servants were staring at the German knechts in armour with swords at their side and long pikes as if the latter were a sort of sea wonder...”)⁶.

During the following weeks, in Northern Germany, Prussian Prince Albrecht started to enlist soldiers. He wanted to assist his brother Wilhelm, the Archbishop of Riga. About three thousand landsknechts and two thousand mounted soldiers arrived by the Pregola River from Saxony, Brandenburg, Braunschweig, Mecklenburg and Münster⁷. King Sigismund Augustus, however, put off the expedition against the Order until the next year. The monthly cost of maintaining the landsknechts and the German cavalry came to 20,000 zł and it was to rise to 200,000 in the course of the next seven months. Despite this, Albrecht did not dismiss the German mercenaries because the Order’s allies from Germany menaced Prussia.

A state of war emergency was also maintained in Royal Prussia, especially in Gdańsk. Achacy Czema, Voivode of Malbork (Marienburg), was the king’s most active helper on this territory. He advised the king to man Gdańsk with a number of armed soldiers in case of an attack from Prussia. Being under pressure from Albrecht and Czema, Sigismund Augustus allowed the city of Gdańsk to hire foreigners⁸. According to review registers (Musterrollen) which have survived in the State Archives of Gdańsk, six infantry companies were recruited at that time⁹. They were commanded by the following captains (Hauptmänner): Hans von Hildesheim, Hans Albert von Oldenburg, Michel Groth von Lübeck, Barthel non Bautzen, Bastian aus Österreich and Andrzej Oehm. In the middle of the sixteenth century a company of German Knights was 400-500 strong. It was composed of 40-50 units (platoons). In December 1556 in Gdańsk, there were from 2500 to 3000 German mercenaries.

⁶B. R u s s o w, *Livländische Chronik*, ed. E. P a b s t, Reval 1845, p. 38; J. N. R o m a n o w s k i, *Wojna Zygmunta Augusta z zakonem inflanckim roku 1557 (Sigismund Augustus’ War with the Livonian Order of 1557)*, ”Rocznik Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk Poznańskiego, I, 1860, pp. 365-367.

⁷”Biblioteka Czartoryskich” No. 302 k. 246-248; ”Biblioteka Kórnicka” No. 263 k. 116-119, 127v.; S. K a r w o w s k i, *Wcielenie Inflant do Litwy i Polski /1558-1561/ (The Incorporation of Lithuania into Poland /1558-1561/)*, no place of publication 1873, p. 29.

⁸”Biblioteka Czartoryskich” No. 302 k. 249-250.

⁹APG Archives of the City of Gdańsk 300, 18 /1, Militaria (Military Accessories) No. a 1/1. *Musterzettel des Hauptmanns*; Hahlweg, *Das Kriegswesen*, p. 125.

On the basis of the surnames it may be assumed that two captains came from Lower Saxony, one from Mecklenburg, one from Lusatia, and one from Austria. There was only one citizen of Gdańsk: Andrzej Oehm. He might have come from the patrician family of Jan Oehm, whose epitaph, dating back to 1559, can be found at St. Mary’s Church in Gdańsk¹⁰. The Gdańsk enlistment took place in Northern Germany and not in the traditional landsknecht recruitment centres of Bavaria and Swabia. One company was even brought from faraway France and The Netherlands. Those infantry troops probably took part in the unsuccessful siege of Metz, which ended in a temporary truce in Vaucelles (February 5, 1556). Oehm’s accounts and report on his recruitment mission in the Netherlands and France, on which he was sent by the city council of Gdańsk, dating from February 1, 1557, is to be found in the Gdańsk Archives. The report is accompanied by the following documents: the captain’s letter concerning fodder for the horses of April 28, 1559; a certificate from the village of Minden, where some of his horses died and a register of June 7, 1559 of the sums of money he received in the years 1556-1557¹¹. Both Oehm and the other captains were enlisted by Gdańsk for a period of two months between December 21, 1556 and January 19, 1557.

In 1557, Captain Gottschalk von Freden also agreed a three-year contract with the city council¹². His contract (Bestallung) specified that he was paid 60 thalers a year. The captain promised to help the city in return and be ready to ”bey den Stadt Gebeuden, Befestigung und dem Zeughause, so man ihn darzu furdert, mit Rath und zu That willing gebrauchen zu lassen.” This commander of Gdańsk performed his functions only in wartime. In peacetime he used to stay outside the city. He was even allowed to serve in a foreign army, but was obliged to be at the council’s disposal at any time. In wartime his pay was increased.

The monthly pay (4 florins) and the whole knecht recruitment procedure did not differ from those found in other towns of the German states, for example in Lübeck. The military articles (Artikelbrief) contained the number of enlisted soldiers, their rights and duties. They dealt with the landsknechts’ behaviour at a review, in fighting, while on the march and in camps. The articles said that every infantryman was to be faithful to God, shouldn’t swear,

¹⁰Z. N o w a k [in:] *Historia Gdańska (The History of Gdańsk)*, ed. E. C i e ś l a k, vol. II, Gdańsk 1982, p. 386.

¹¹APG 300, 18/1, a. 1/2-6.

¹²*Ibidem*, No. a. 1/8; Hahlweg, *Das Kriegswesen*, p.118.

ought to remain honest and faithful to the Council. If his pay was late, the landsknecht shouldn't rebel. He was not allowed to show other man's property at a review. During fights for castles and towns, the children young and pregnant women, old people and priests were to be specially protected. Town halls, mills, bakeries and forges could not be destroyed. The above articles were read to the soldiers on the site of a review. The knights took the following vows: "Alle Artickel, so mir itzt furgelesen und ich wol verstanden habe, wil ich stetts veste unnd unvorbrüchlich halten, so war mir Godt helffe und sein heiliges Evangelion¹³."

Of course, the above articles differed from the landsknechts' real practices. Times when enlistment officers claimed that only a person who had an untarnished reputation could be given an advance were gone. There were already many casual men among the landsknechts, tramps and even ordinary criminals prosecuted by the law. There were also unemployed mercenaries and men from crushed parties of robber-knights (Raubritter). However, no poor people or beggars could be found in the ranks. A candidate for a soldier had to buy his own weapons and equipment, which excluded the town and village poor from the enlistment. Nonetheless, with the passage of time, the army gradually became more and more plebeian. It was composed, to a large extent, of sons of townspeople and peasants. Among the townspeople there were representatives of both the patrician families and the plebs. They had had some warfare experience, because in German towns armed units were composed of townspeople capable of bearing arms. The obligation to serve in military forces resulted directly from one's membership in a guild. In Gdańsk the mercenary units were also accompanied by a municipal militia. In 1561, a decree was issued in the city ordering men capable of bearing weapons to be present at a yearly review held on 1st May. The review was to be combined with battle array drills¹⁴.

The landsknechts were a type of infantry specially trained in close fighting. Therefore they were armed with pikes, halberds and swords. Their side-arms were short, broad swords with one-handed open hilts. Soldiers who served in the forces at double the pay the ordinary ones were then getting (Doppelsöldner) used to be equipped with large two-handed swords. Choppers, rapiers and daggers with narrow but thick pommels were used less frequently. The basic weapon was a pike

(Landsknechtspieß) 5-6 metres long, equipped with a massive leaf-shaped head. It was used for striking slow, long blows, which were aimed at the armour welds, the enemy's throat or loins. The halberd with a lengthened head was much less popular. It was used for piercing rather than breaking the opponent's armour.

The landsknechts had become famous thanks to the pikes, but they soon started to use firearms, which were gradually gaining in importance. The light weapon was the harquebus, which had a range of 200 metres. It had a short, massive, angular butt-end, pentagonal in cross-section. The harquebus with a hook (Hackenbüchse) had a longer range. Its name originated from the large hook fixed to the end of the barrel, which was used for fastening the weapon to the edge of a wall or timber fortification in order to reduce the recoil. Two soldiers worked the heavy harquebus with a straight, narrow butt-end and sometimes twin-hooks (Doppelhacken). It was fired from a wall or wagon. Harquebuses with hooks used as firearms were called muskets (Musceten). On the basis of a drawing found in the Iconographic Codex in Staatsbibliothek in Munich, it may be assumed that harquebuses with hooks placed on rests were used in Germany as early as in 1500-1510. The new weapon - the musket - was a larger, 19-23-bore firearm. It was also heavier than the harquebus and had a range of about 200-300 metres. Muskets were equipped with still-quite-primitive sights. Balls fired from this firearm could pierce the thickest suit of armour, which was very important during fights with the heavy cavalry. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the number of fusiliers was growing, but the number of muskets was not big yet. After 1564, in the Habsburg army a full-time company of landsknechts was, on average, equipped with about 200 harquebuses and only 10 muskets.

Among the landsknechts only the pikemen had defensive armour. It consisted of half-armour (Trahharnish) modelled on so-called landsknecht's armour. The main element of such a suit was the cuirass composed of a breastplate, a back-plate and sometimes cuisses and pauldrons. Some of the landsknechts had iron helmets. The so-called basnet (Schaller) with a lengthened brim forming a neck-guard at the back was very common. However, burgonets (Sturmhauben) with cheek-pieces, falls and pointed crests were used much more frequently. A basnet or burgonet successfully covered the warrior's face but did not obstruct his view. The helmets also protected the back of the head and the nape of the neck against bolts and arrows. The clothes were richly coloured, bright and flamboyant. They varied in design. The soldiers wore *Pluderhosen* with puffs,

¹³ APG 300, 18/1, a. 1/10; Hahlweg, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-126.

¹⁴ APG 300, 18/1, No. 151; Hahlweg, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

slashed *Wämser*, berets and hats. During a battle they would put on leather jackets, sometimes quilted with cotton¹⁵.

The tactical landsknecht unit was a column forming a compact rectangle (*Haufe*). Firing from the harquebuses and the butts of pointed pikes arranged in a defensive position stuck in the ground were to resist the enemy's attack and cause the greatest possible losses. During fights for fortified sites, the forces were usually split and the landsknecht companies used to be divided into smaller units. The pole arms were then replaced with side-arms. During a stop, the landsknechts would make camp, modeled on the Hussite wagon laager. The wagons were arranged in a circle and a bank was made, which was strengthened with a stockade and baskets filled with earth. In case of an armed raid, pikes and firearms defended the camp. The guns were positioned inside the wagon laager.

The weak point of the sixteenth century landsknechts was their ineffectiveness in siege battles and military operations carried out in hard, changing, terrain conditions. Of course, in such situations splitting the battle array deprived the knights of their main trump card: that is, the strength of a compact mass armed with pointed pikes. As the knights were not sufficiently equipped with firearms, compared with the Spaniards, their participation in such battles led up to numerous defeats. They were, among others, defeated by Turkish janissaries in the Battle of Buda in 1541 and the French infantry, who made them withdraw from the fortresses of Lorraine in 1552. Those defeats deprived landsknecht troops of the first place on the list of the infantry units of Europe.

They were not to take part in Sigismund Augustus' Poswol expedition of 1557 either. Gdańsk forces did not carry out any operations on the Livonian coast, which had been planned by Prussian Prince Albrecht. Besides, no attack was made on the western allies of the Livonian Order and the landsknecht companies, which had not been used in battle,

¹⁵ Z. S t e f a ń s k a, *Arkebuzy, Hakownica i muszkiet. Artukul dyskusyjny (The Harquebus, the Harquebus with a Hook and the Musket. A Discussion Article)*, "Muzealnictwo Wojskowe", vol. 4, Warsaw 1989; Z. Ż y g u l s k i J r., *Broń w dawnej Polsce na tle uzbrojenia Europy i Bliskiego Wschodu (Arms in Old Poland against a Background of Europe and the Near East)*, Warsaw 1975; W. D z i e w a n o w s k i, *Zarys dziejów uzbrojenia w Polsce (An Outline of the History of Arms and Armour in Poland)*, Warsaw 1935; D. M i l l e r, *The Landsknechts*, London 1976; M. P l e w c z y ń s k i, *W służbie polskiego króla. Zagadnień struktury narodowościowej armii koronnej w latach 1500-1574 (At the Service of the Polish King. From the Issues of the Crown Army Nationality Structure in the Years 1500-1574)*, Siedlce 1995.

were partly dismissed. Andrzej Oehm withdrew from the service, but Gottschalk von Freden had his contract prolonged until 26th August 1560¹⁶.

As far as Livonia is concerned, the aims of Gdańsk and the Crown were conflicting. The city wanted to stay neutral in the Baltic conflict, which became especially evident after the outbreak of the Nordic War (1560-1570). The war imposed certain limitations on Gdańsk's trade with Sweden, Denmark, Lübeck and other Baltic states. The city feared attack by the Swedish fleet. Consequently, despite Sigismund Augustus' efforts, Gdańsk refused to use its ships against Sweden. The King had to respect the city's neutrality and be satisfied with the people of Gdańsk's participation in the blockade of the Narew River within the port.

It was only in August 1563 that the news of Prince Erik of Braunschweig's army's passage through West Pomerania made Gdańsk start getting ready for battle. The city declared that they would not let the German troops enter Ducal Prussia. On September 3rd, Gottschalk was issued with a safe conduct letter by the city authorities, who also ordered him to enlist soldiers. In addition, they formulated the military articles and the text of the oath that the new warriors were to obey and swear. The *Artikelbrief* read, "My, burmistrz i Rada Królewskiego Miasta Gdańska wzywamy wszystkich dowódców knechtów (Obristen Hauptleuten, Fendrichen, Doppel Soldern) i każdego lancknechta, do którego nasz otwarty list dotrze i zawiadamiamy, ze Gottschalk von Freden dalismy polecenie oddział (Hauffen) lancknechtów do naszej służby przyjac" ("We, the mayor of the Council of the Royal City of Gdańsk, call on all knecht commanders (Obristen Hauptleuten, Fendrichen, Doppel and Soldern) and every landsknecht who will have a chance to read our open letter and inform them that Gottschalk von Freden has been given an order to admit a unit of knights (Hauffen) to the service"). The knechts were to be paid 4 florins for a 30-day month of service. In the case of a successful raid or victorious battle their pay was to be calculated anew. If the knechts were to stay in the service for a period longer than a month, they became obliged to accept this and turn down other foreign offers. An ill or wounded soldier was to receive his pay until the contract expired¹⁷. There might have been some problems with the purchase of arms and armour, as five years later (on February 26th, 1568), the council issued a verdict in connection with a broken agreement of September 20th,

¹⁶ APG 300, 18/1, a. 1/8-9.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, a. 1/10; Hahlweg, *Das Kriegswesen*, pp. 123-125.

1563 concerning the sale of armour for 500 soldiers for Gdańsk.

Eventually, Erik did not attempt to lay siege to the well-fortified city. According to the chronicle by Marcin Bielski, "Gdańszczanie mu ... pokój wiosek swych odkupując, pozyczyli trzynastcie tysięcy talarów na wieczne nicoddanie" ("The people of Gdańsk ... lent him thirteen thousand thalers for ever to buy peace for their villages")¹⁸.

Altogether, we know the names of 16 captains and commanders of Gdańsk in the years 1548-1573 (11 of them came from Germany). Neither they nor the ordinary soldiers at the service of Gdańsk were motivated by a sense of belonging or nationality or the political interests of the countries they came from. It was only the military oath and the supreme authorities, who decided whether a mercenary was to serve under the banner of the king and the Polish Crown with Sigismund's Eagle or the banner with the emblem of the city, that were truly respected by the landsknechts. The last Jagiellon rulers did not impose a Crown commander on Gdańsk in the years 1526, 1552 and 1570. Therefore the German commanders of the city were only at the service of the town. Gdańsk, like Königsberg, appeared to be a very narrow gate and the Crown military science was not much influenced by German war technology. It should be remembered that there were noticeable differences between Polish and German infantrymen. The differences were especially visible in the organization, arms, armour and way of fighting. The last Jagiellon rulers did not fully use their considerable

infantry enlistment opportunities resulting from the recruitment of the inhabitants of the Kaszuby region and Gdańsk (the urban area had a population of about 40 thousand). Achacy Czema, who was one of the officers responsible for enlistment in the area, did not seem to be particularly interested in military activities after the Teutonic menace had been eliminated. As the military power of Royal Prussia was decreasing, the city of Gdańsk was gradually gaining in importance. The 1550s became a turning point in this process.

At that time the military balance between the great city and the nobility in Prussia was precarious. Those critical years in the history of the Prussian military art had passed unnoticed by Sigismund Augustus and the Crown nobility. It was only the crisis of 1576-1577 that drew the king's attention to the situation in Prussia. Before the crisis the Crown did not realize the importance of numerous principal transformations in the military system, concealed under the surface of major political (the sovereignty of Prussia) and military (the organization of the privateers' fleet) problems. Thus in the light of data concerning the land army and particularly the infantry Gdańsk did not contribute much to the Polish military science, though the main port-city played a significant and widely recognized role in the creation of the Crown Navy. It did not become a wide bridge over which the newest western-type military technology could have reached Polish territory.

Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra

¹⁸M. Bielski, *Kronika Polska (The Polish Chronicle)*, Sanok 1856, vol. II, p. 1147.

