

## The battle of Tannenberg (Grünwald) in 1410

In 1386, following the dynastic agreement of Krewo of 1385, the Grand Prince of Lithuania, Olgerd (Olgirdas), was succeeded by his son Jagiello (Jogaela, 1377-1434). He married Queen Jadwiga of Poland, the daughter of Louis the Great, and converted from Christian Orthodox faith to Roman Catholicism thus becoming the legitimate sovereign of both states of Lithuania and Poland under the name of King Wladislaw II.

In 1392 Jagiello had to recognize his cousin, Keistut's son Vitovt (Vytautas), as a separate vassal, the Grand Prince of Lithuania (1392-1430). Under Vitovt's rule we can establish the greatest extension of the Lithuanian state in control of the Russian lands of Volynia, Kiev, Polotsk, Chernigov, and a large part of Smolensk. Vitovt was able to challenge Moscow for supremacy on the great Russian plain. The German Teutonic Order organized several crusades against pagans and Christian Orthodox schismatics in the spirit of "Drang nach Osten" ("Push to the East") and conquered lands from Lithuania and Poland along the Baltic coast from the Gulf of Finland and beyond the delta of the Elbe river.<sup>1</sup>

Vitovt, a great feudal monarch, followed the formation of a kingdom under his rule, a great Russian suzerain state of all princes rival to the Grand Duke of Moscow. Towards this goal he practised a game of politics. At the start allied with the Teutonic Knights against Poland, later with Poland against the Knights and against the Grand Duke of Moscow, and finally after 1426 with Sigismund of Hungary and Germany against Poland.<sup>2</sup> The Vlach (Olah) Latin speaking population of the Maramures district of Transylvania and their Voevode (Kniaz', Hospodar) Bogdan contributed to the emancipation of Moldova from Hungarian suzerainty and established the independence of Moldova in 1359. A Hungarian-Polish rivalry over Moldova started to take shape.<sup>3</sup>

"Truly towards the end of the month of September 1387, when King Wladislaw Jagiello was on his way back from Lithuania and was crossing the Russian lands reconquered from the Hungarians, he stopped several days in Lvov (Lemberg). Here he met Voevode (Hospodar) Petru Musat who on September 26, 1387, "of his own free will and not forced by anyone" paid homage to King Wladislaw of Poland and Queen Hedwiga (Jadwiga). To these and his descendants was dedicated the entire population and the land of Moldavia, the oath taken in the presence of Chiprian (Kiptrian), the Metropolitan of Kiev."<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that Hospodar Petru Musat I of Moldova (1375-1391) was married to a close relative, probably a cousin, of the Polish king Wladislaw Jagiello and was able to advance a loan of 4 000 silver rubles on a three-year term to the Polish king. The Polish king placed the town of Halich (Halicz) and the region known as Pokutia in pawn.<sup>5</sup>

"... an army from northern Moldavia participates together with Ruthenians and

Lithuanians in the battle waged by the Polish army, led by King Wladislaw I Lokietek, against the Margrave of Brandenburg.<sup>6</sup>

This event, taking place in 1325, seems to indicate the first participation of Moldova in a war against the Teutonic Order. Later the Hospodar Steven I or Stetsko (1394-1399) dispatched a contingent of Moldavian bowmen to join Poland against the Teutonic Knights.<sup>7</sup>

Prince Vitovt of Lithuania in his major campaign against the Mongols met disaster together with his allies in 1399. It is interesting to note that one of his allies was Hospodar Steven I Stesko of Moldova and “the fugitive Khan Tokhtamysh in the battle against the Golden Horde army which took place on the Vorksla at the headwaters of the Dnieper on August 12, 1399.”<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this disaster Steven I Stetsko of Moldava disappeared, presumed dead under mysterious circumstances, and he was replaced in Moldova by Hospodar Alexander the Good (1400-1432), son of Hospodar Roman I, with the assistance of the Wallachian Hospodar Mircea the Old (1386-1418).<sup>9</sup>

“The participation in 1325 of a Romanian army recruited on Moldavia’s territory, together with Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian armies, in hostilities against the Margrave of Brandenburg, is another indication that the power of the leaders east of the Carpathians had been strengthened ...

Brought to the throne with the support of Mircea the Old Alexander the Good (1400-1432) gave Moldavia a long period of economic prosperity while his feudal state was consolidated and its international prestige enhanced. From the very first years of his reign, Alexander the Good realized that it was in the interest of the Moldavian state to continue the policy of cooperation with Poland. The Moldavian armies repeatedly fought alongside those of the Polish and the Lithuanian ones against the Teutonic Knights, gaining distinction at Grünwald in 1410 and at Marienburg in 1422.”<sup>10</sup>

Western sources are sometimes misinformed and make errors like the one in the following paragraph:

“Grunnervaldt German-Polish Wars 1404, between the Poles, under Wladislaw IV, and the Teutonic Knights, under their Grand Master. The Poles gained a complete victory, and it was said that 50,000 knights perished, though it is more than doubtful whether their whole army amounted so many.”<sup>11</sup>

The year 1404 is definitely wrong, because all sources indicate the year 1410 for the battle of Tannenberg (Grünwald). It is also unfair to credit only the Poles for this victory and to ignore the participation of Lithuania with its Russian vassals, the Czechs, the Tatars, and the bowmen of Moldova. At that time the king of Poland was not Wladislaw IV, but Wladislaw II Jagiello (1377-1434). A better description of this event is presented to us by Professor N. V. Riasanovsky of Berkley University:

“In addition, in 1410 Vitovt personally led his army in the crucial battle of Tannenberg, or Grünwald, where the joint forces of Poland and Lithuania crushed the Teutonic Knights, thus finally eliminating this deadly threat to both Slav and Lithuanian.”<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet-Russian historian L. G. Bezkrivnyi points out that “the allied armies were

under the command of King Jagiello. The right wing was covered by the Lithuanian-Russian army of Prince Vitovt, the left wing by the Polish army under the command of Zyndram from Mashkovits. Part of the allied army included also Czech-Moravian units of Jan Solava and Jan Sokol. Finally in the army of Vitovt there was the vassal Tatar cavalry ...

Modern historians admit that the allies numbered 40,000 and the Teutonic Order somewhat less.<sup>13</sup>

The bowmen of Moldova are not mentioned and Professor P. P. Panaitescu maintains:

“Our conclusion is that the Moldavians did not participate at the battle of Grünwald corresponding with the provisions at that time in the acts of vassalage which did not require the Moldavians to fight in Prussia as well as the special general political situation in 1410. At that time Sigismund of Luxemburg, the King of Hungary, a dangerous neighbor of Moldova, was supporting the Teutonic Knights as their ally. In such circumstances an elementary political caution dictated to Alexander the Good not to send his army to Russia in order not to provoke this way the mighty king of Hungary and Germany.”<sup>14</sup>

However the Romanian historian C. C. Giurescu disagrees and maintains that the victory at Tannenberg (Grünwald) in 1410 was realized with the assistance of the Moldavian bowmen sent by the Hospodar of Moldova. Emil Picot and G. Bengescu, utilizing German chroniclers, published in *Scriptores Rerum Prussicarum*, Vol. III, IV, were the first ones to maintain that a contingent from Moldova participated in the battle of Tannenberg (Grünwald) in 1410. This was later supported by A. D. Xenopol, I. Ursu, I. Minea, etc.

“According to the act of 1404, renewed in 1407, Alexander was obliged to give assistance against all the enemies of Poland without exception; and as Poland mobilized all the forces of Poland and Lithuania including all vassal states including the Russians, Tatars, probably there were here also soldiers of Alexander.”<sup>15</sup>

A new source, dated September 30, 1409, the Komtur de Osterode reports to the Teutonic Grand Master the arrival of a Walach (Moldavian) contingent in the Polish-Lithuanian camp. The Polish historian Marian Biskup in an annex dealing with the war from 1409 to 1411 reveals a spy report which testifies and maintains the presence of Moldavian troops in the Polish-Lithuanian camp.<sup>16</sup> German historiography points out that at the battle of Tannenberg among the allies against the Teutonic Order were Tatars, Russians, Vlachs (Moldavians), and Czechs. On July 15, 1410, the battle was started by an attack of the left wing under the command of Vitold. It was forced to retreat and the Teutonic Knights advanced producing disorder in the Polish and Czech ranks. At this critical moment the Russian contingents from Smolensk saved the situation by facing the thrust of the Teutonic cavalry attack sacrificing one regiment, but the two remaining regiments were able to stop the Teutonic Knights thus giving the Polish forces a chance to regroup and start a decisive counterattack.

“Towards the evening the battle was finished with a total defeat of the army of the Order. The battle claimed approximately 18,000 crusaders beside the wounded and prisoners. Almost all the “flower“ of the Order army perished together with Ulrich von Jungingen.”<sup>17</sup>

More details are given to us about the Russians from Smolensk by a Soviet-Russian historian:

“Under the command of the Lithuanian Prince Simon-Lingevin Olgerdovich they heroically stood their ground against the advancing attack of the Knights and protected the wing of the Polish army. In this action one regiment perished completely and the two remaining regiments suffered heavy losses.”<sup>18</sup>

The battle of Tannenberg (Grünwald) was instrumental in destroying the legend about the invincible Teutonic Order. It created an international crisis inside the Order by shaking their reliance on their power. The victory of the allies stopped for some time the German expansion in Eastern Europe contributing to the international significance of Poland and its advance to the Baltic Sea. The historical significance of the victory at Tannenberg (Grünwald) 1410 for Eastern Europe remains the symbol of unity against German expansion.<sup>19</sup>

“The battle of Grünwald created the origin and the total collapse of the Teutonic Order. This battle had a prominent international significance as an important phase in the struggle of the people of Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Bielorussia, and the Czechs, against the German aggression. It was demonstrated that the union of the allied countries in the struggle of a common war against a common enemy was the main reason for the victory. This was a legal fall of the military-clerical country formed by feudal colonial policy of the Papacy and its allies. In the eastern Baltic region the Livonian Order survived until 1561 when the Russian army of Ivan the Terrible eliminated it completely.”<sup>20</sup>

Most of the Russian sources do not mention the Moldavian bowmen and their participation in the battle of Grünwald (Tannenberg) on July 15, 1410. It is interesting to note that the Teutonic Knights were invited to settle down in Transylvania from 1211 to 1225 by the Hungarian king Andrew II (1205-1235) with the condition to ensure the defense of the south-eastern frontier of Transylvania. In control of the Byrsa land the Teutonic Knights did not observe the terms of their colonization, building stone fortresses and overstepping the boundaries of the territory they had been granted. In 1222 Hermann of Salza received the royal agreement to the conquest of Transcarpathian territory along the Danube inhabited by Latin speaking Vlachs (Wallachians, Moldavians) and ruled by the Cumans. It seems that Hermann of Salza wanted to extend the control of the Teutonic Order to the Black Sea, to establish contact with the Latin Empire of Constantinople, and place his Transylvanian territory under the protection of the Pope. The Hungarian king Andrew II intervened with armed forces and evicted the Teutonic Order.<sup>21</sup>

Some additional details can be obtained from the Romanian scholar Alexandru Gona:

“In order to avoid the predatory incursions of the Cumans, Andrew II, the king of Hungary, grants before May 7, 1211, to Hermann of Salza, the Great Master of the Teutonic Order the land of Byrsa. Within a few years the valiant cavaliers stop the predatory units in mountain passes and taking control of the mountains with access to the south and east built fortifications and occupied the lands between Prahova-Ialomitsa and Siret up to the borders of the Brodniks of Brodnik land names which disappear from history at the same

time as the Cuman empire. Following the path of the Teutonic Knights the Catholic missionaries soon came to convert the Cumans and afterwards after the eviction of the Teutonic Order in the spring of 1225 king Andrew II assumes the title of king of the Cumans and the land of the Brodniks namely of the land of the Romanians and Moldova.<sup>422</sup>

As a result of the past experience of the Teutonic Order in Transylvania the German chronicles do mention the Vlachs of Moldova and their participation as vassals of Poland at the battle of Grünwald (Tannenberg) in 1410.

“Enthusiasm for the crusade had disappeared; the influx of Knights from the empire declined; the citizens and other inhabitants of the Order state resented the heavy burden of clerical domination, which was becoming increasingly anachronistic. Hence the defeat at Tannenberg in 1410 was not an unexpected military disaster, although the political situation still remained fluid.”<sup>423</sup>

A detailed description of the battle of Grünwald (Tannenberg) can be found in the history of Poland:

“The Polish and Lithuanian preparations were carried out under strict secrecy. Ahead of time were prepared and assembled parts of a pontoon bridge built for the crossing of the allied armies across the Vistula near Chervinsk. At that time the creation of such a bridge was a shining example of military engineering craftsmanship. Army supplies were concentrated in Platsk. Crossing the Vistula the Polish army joined near Chervinsk the army of the Great Dukedom of Lithuania and the detachments of the Masovetsk princes. On July 9, 1410, the allied forces crossed the border of the Order moving towards Malbork. The advance from Chervinsk was unexpected by the enemy, who expected the attack of the Polish army in Eastern Pomorie. For the army of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania this was a very profitable situation which is an evidence of the great experience and military skill demonstrated by the Polish and Lithuanian command. The allied army met the army of the Order at the village of Grünwald on Juli 15, 1410, where the decisive battle took place. The Polish-Lithuanian-Russian army in size outnumbered the forces of the Order army which contained about 6 000 men. In the Polish army there were three regiments of Czechs and Poles from Silesia. In their ranks, as it is assumed, the future leader of the Taborites, Yan Zhiska, was fighting.

On the side of the Order there was the superiority of armament and military preparation. In the ranks of the Order army there were the representatives of 22 feudal states of Western Europe. An ally of the Order was the Hungarian king Sigismund of Luxemburg, who declared war on Poland. On the side of the Order in this “Great War“ participated also a part of the Germanized western seashore princes. Poland and Lithuania were forced to rely only on their own forces. Any attempts to obtain assistance from the West were in vain. Under such international circumstances the result of the battle at Grünwald gained special significance for the Polish-Lithuanian side. This was a serious experience for the allied Slavic forces and the Lithuanian nationalities in their century-old struggle against the German feudal aggression. The action started with an artillery duel which did not inflict noticeable losses on any side. After approximately one hour the Knights were able to

concentrate overwhelming forces against the right wing of the allied army which was under the command of Vitovt. Armed below the level of the Poles the regiments of Lithuania were forced to retreat followed by significant forces of the enemy. The Polish forces who formed the left wing of the allied army faced the danger of a blow from the flank. At this critical moment of the battle the bold heroism demonstrated by the Smolensk regiments saved the situation. They were located at the center and became the victims of the main thrust of the cavalry of the Knights. Disregarding heavy losses the Smolensk forces were able to survive this attack and to join the Polish army. At this moment the basic action of the battle was switched over to the left wing of the allied army where the main forces of the allied army were located, i. e. the regiments of the Polish knights. Towards the evening the battle ended with a complete destruction of the Knights of the Order. The returning Lithuanian forces assisted the Poles to deliver the final blow to the army of the crusaders. The Order suffered great losses – many were killed, not counting the wounded and captured. Almost the entire “flower” of the Order army perished, including the Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen. After the battle of Grünwald the allied army did not encounter in fact any opposition. Numerous cities and castles of the Order capitulated without any fight ...

The chronicler of the Order, with great sadness after the Grünwald events noted: “After the next day the counting of the days of its necessity, extinction and downfall to the eternal times already starts.”<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Stefan *Ștefanescu*, *Participarea Românilor la Lupta de la Grünwald (15 Iulie, 1410)* (The Romanian Participation at the Battle of Grünwald, July 15, 1410), in: *Studii Revista de Istorie (Studies History Journal)*, Bucharest 1961, pp. 5-6.
- 2 P. P. *Panaitescu*, *Lupta Comuna a Moldovei și Poloniei Împotriva Cavalerilor Teutoni* (The Common Struggle of Moldova and Poland Against the Teutonic Knights), *Romanoslavica*, Bucharest 1960, Vol. IV, p. 291.
- 3 R. W. *Seton Watson*, *A History of the Roumanians*, New York 1963, p. 28. Also see my article “Moldova and the Moldavians: A Tragedy in Eastern Europe”, in: *South East European Monitor*, Vienna, Austria 1995, Vol. II, No. 2, p. 20.
- 4 Gheorghe I. *Moisescu*, *Catolicismul în Moldova Până La Sfârșitul Veacului XIV* (Catholicism in Moldova until the end of the fourteenth century), Bucharest 1942, p. 114. See also: D. M. *Dragnev et al.* (eds.), *Ocherki Vneshne' politicheskoi Istorii Moldavskogo Kniazhestva* (Outline of Foreign Affairs History of the Principality of Moldova), Kishinev 1987, p. 22.
- 5 Constantin C. *Giurescu*, *Istoria Românilor (History of the Romanians)*, Bucharest 1935, Vol. I, p. 431. See also: Emil *Diaconescu*, *Românii din Rasarit-Trasnistria (Romanians from East-Transnistria)*, Jassy 1942, p. 46 and p. 54. See also my article „The Ukrainian Cossacks in the Early Antil-Ottoman Struggle for Independence of Moldavia”, in: *East European Quarterly*, Boulder, Colorado, Summer 1980, Vol. XIV, Nr. 2, p. 242.
- 6 Horia C. *Matei et al.* (eds.), *Chronological History of Romania*, Bucharest 1974, p. 62.
- 7 *Panaitescu*, *Lupta Comuna a Moldovei și Poloniei Împotriva Cavalerilor Teutoni*, pp. 226-227.
- 8 *Dragnev*, *Ocherki Vneshne' politicheskoi Istorii Moldavskogo Kniazhestva*, p. 30. See also: Emil *Diaconescu* – Dumitru *Matei*, *Alexandru cel Bun (Alexander the Good)*, Bucharest 1979, p. 14.
- 9 *Ștefanescu*, *Participarea Românilor la Lupta de la Grünwald*, p. 8.

- 10 Andrei *Otetea*, *The History of the Romanian People*, Bucharest 1970, p. 177 and p. 197.
- 11 George *Bruce*, *Harbottle's Dictionary of Battles*, New York – Cincinnati – Toronto – London – Melbourne 1981, p. 107.
- 12 Nicholas V. *Riasanovsky*, *A History of Russia*, London – Toronto 1969, p. 150.
- 13 L. G. *Beskrovnyi* (ed.), *Stranitsy Boevogo Proshlogo Ocherki Voennoi Istorii Rossi* (Pages of Military Past Outlines of Russian Military History), Moscow 1968, p. 34.
- 14 *Panaiteescu*, *Lupta Comuna a Moldovei si Poloniei Impotriva Cavalerilor Teutoni*, p. 229.
- 15 *Ştefanescu*, *Participarea Romînilor la Lupta dela Grünwald*, p. 13.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.
- 18 *Beskrovnyi* (ed.), *Stranitsy Boevogo Proshlogo Ocherki Voennoi Istorii Rossi*, p. 35.
- 19 *Ştefanescu*, *Participarea Romînilor la Lupta dela Grünwald*, p. 20.
- 20 *Beskrovnyi* (ed.), *Stranitsy Boevogo Proshlogo Ocherki Voennoi Istorii Rossi*, p. 36.
- 21 *Matei* et al. (eds.), *Chronological History of Romania*, pp. 54-56, B. A. *Rybakova* (ed.), *Pol'sha i Rus'* (Poland and Russia), Moscow 1974, p. 70.
- 22 Alexandru *Gonța*, *Românii și hoarda de Aur 1241-1502* (Romanians and the Golden Horde 1241-1502), Munich 1983, p. 22.
- 23 K. *Bosl* – A. *Gieysztor* – F. *Graus* – M. M. *Postan* – F. *Seibt*, ed. Geoffrey *Barracough*, *Eastern and Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, London 1970, p. 72.
- 24 V. D. *Koroliuk* – I. S. *Miller* et al. (eds.), *Istoria Polshy* (History of Poland), Moscow 1956, Vol. I, pp. 125-127. See also: *Ştefanescu*, *Participarea Romînilor la Lupta dela Grünwald*, pp. 11-13.