

OSWALD BALZER

Late Professor of Polish History
at the University of Lwów

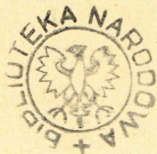
THE ANNIVERSARY
of the
BATTLE OF GRUNWALD

Issued by the
POLISH MINISTRY OF INFORMATION
London, 1941



br. 23773

Translated from a Lecture, delivered
in Lwów on July 15, 1910, at the
celebration of the 500th Anniversary
of the Battle of Grunwald.



WYDANO Z DOBLETÓW
Biblioteki Narodowej

1960-D-2236

THE ANNIVERSARY OF GRUNWALD

“Holy Virgin, Mother of God!” sounded the humble hymn of thousands of Polish knights before the battle of Grunwald as, of old custom, they sang the Polish battle-song. That song was peculiar and distinct from the battle-songs of other nations by the fact that it contains not one allusion to battle. Seek not in it any reference to the enemy, or to the struggle against him; you will find no prayer that the Polish arms may be victorious; there is only an entreaty to “forgive us our trespasses,” for a devout life, to “lead us not into evil temptations.” This song of expiation, this song of the just, could be the battle-song only of a nation which, when it entered into battle, did so in the name of justice, and which by its own expiation drew comfort from the future victory.

That battle-song did not rise to the vault of heaven for the first time at Grunwald, but perhaps never before had Polish knighthood sung it with such a perception of the importance of the moment as then, half a thousand years ago, immediately before the final settlement with the Knights of the Cross. A “great war” was being fought to its conclusion, a “great battle” was imminent. A great battle, which was to be the final settlement for two centuries of continual, recurring wrong, and which was to establish the basis of the future historical relations between the two antagonists.

And even more. At Grunwald not only did two armies confront each other; not only were two States to measure strength with each other. Here two worlds stood face to face, two cultures were at grips with each other, two political and ethical ideas, two distinct, collective spirits, which had been formulated on two completely different bases, and which contradicted each other at every point.

On the one side was the Polish nation. Settled on its own sacred earth since the beginning of historical time, that nation had so thoroughly blended in all its being with that earth that it had become for all time the nation's greatest passion and most precious treasure, a Divine legacy which it would never renounce. It was a nation which had succeeded in creating great, strong political organisms, whether in the times of the Boleslaws, or again in the days of Lokietek and Casimir the Great ; but it had built these organisms *on its own earth and from its own earth*, never making any demand for alien earth. And when its influence and dominance reached even beyond the bounds of the distribution of things Polish, as had happened a little prior to the battle of Grunwald in regard to Lithuania and its Ruthenian territory, that nation had achieved this success by means of *Union*, by brotherly association ; not by conquest, but under the watchword of equality and the participation of all in equal rights. At the very basis of the idea of Poland as a State was the *principle of right*, the major consideration was the *element of justice*, and the outstanding factors of the ethical culture comprehended in the soul of the nation.

On the other side was the German element, the Knights of the Cross, and with them knighthood from various of the German lands, but especially from Northern Germany. And it is not surprising that they came from that particular area. The northern branch of the German nation had long since inscribed on its banners one governing watchword: the fight against Slavs, the annexation of Slavonic land. That land was, and still is, the object of the German nation's everlasting cupidity ; the farther it advanced, the wider was flung the circle of its further desires. To reach its end, from the beginning it resorted to various methods: the peaceable ones of colonisation, then, at a favourable moment, resort to arms, and, when arms alone were insufficient, it always succeeded in throwing an apple of discord among the Slavs themselves, so that during a period of internecine struggles and internal enfeeblement it could strike all the more surely at each of the disputants in turn.

This drive of the German element against Slavonic lands had begun some seven hundred years before Grunwald. Passing from its original less onerous form of laying the small Slavonic States under tribute, from the beginning of the tenth century it turned to the direct conquest and annexation of their lands. The first great era of this struggle ended in the twelfth century: despite their strong resistance, despite frequently heroic attempts, all the Western Slavonic areas beyond the river Elbe lay at the feet of the triumphant conqueror, and the sphere of German domination

was extended from the Elbe and Saale to the bounds of Bohemia and Poland. On these subjected lands, saturated with a sea of Slavonic tears and blood, arose the rudiments of later powerful German State organisms, which possessed not one foot of earth originally German, where all was conquered. And the further enlargement of these organisms, whether before Grunwald or after, was achieved also by way of conquest. And in their endeavour to achieve a gradual increase, when there was no longer any possibility of immediate Slavonic conquest, they gained their booty at the expense of their German neighbours. Here the idea of annexation became the basic idea of the State ; nor was it confined only to the State. Amid the continual, age-old wars, recurrent with every generation, the slogan of ruthless, destructive struggle with things Slavonic, the watchword of systematic, continually extending conquest of the Slavonic spheres, completely took possession of the collective soul of that community, and during all its further future became its essential component, its innate property. Henceforth it would never rid itself of that property, would never restrain the blow wherever it could strike, would never soften that blow at the cost of unmanly withdrawal ; here its only restraint would be the opponent's powers of resistance, irrespective of whether it found expression in weapons or in spiritual powers of endurance.

Almost immediately after the end of the struggle with the Slavs of the River Elbe, after the former ineffective attempts, repulsed by Boleslaw the Brave and Boleslaw the Wrymouthed, Germanism sent two new advance guards of conquest to Poland. One, attired in peaceful dress, relying on economic bases, had as its primary object to prepare the ground for the later Germanisation of Polish spheres. I refer to German colonisation, which from the very beginning of the thirteenth century introduced its German settlers into Polish areas, to flood them all over Poland's expanse. The other advance guard attired itself not merely in peaceful dress for Poland's benefit, but even in the garb of evangelical love, yet it became a source of thousands of abominations during all her further future. This advance guard consisted of the Order of the Knights of the Cross, who were settled on a scrap of Polish earth from the second quarter of the thirteenth century onward. Of these two crusading battering-rams directed against Poland, one proved almost completely useless in the days of the Battle of Grunwald. German colonisation failed to Germanise Poland, and was shattered against the country's mighty ability to assimilate intruding elements, an ability which was then revealed by no means for the last time. All the more strongly, all the more importunately were her walls

battered by the other German impulse, by the Knights of the Cross, one of the most peculiar, and also most worthless phenomena in the history of humanity, an order based entirely on hypocrisy and falsehood, on a fundamental contradiction between the theoretical task and the practical deed. That order which in its vows renounced all worldly ends, but which directed all its efforts towards establishing its worldly power ; which claimed to fight the pagan in order to convert him, but fought him in order to extend its own possessions, caring little about conversion ; which in this struggle against the pagan was supposed to come to the aid of the Christian peoples, but which directed its weapons even more against Christian Poland than against the pagans, storming against her most violently at the very moment when she had succeeded in winning Lithuania to Christianity ; that Order which was supposed to rally the masculine strength of the German nation in faithful service to Christ, but which harnessed the name of Christ into the service of the German nation. This Order took up the thread of the struggle temporarily broken off five hundred years before, the struggle of northern Germanism against the Slavonic world, to wage it against its nearest neighbour, namely, Poland.

Thus this struggle of the Order was not an historically new fact, but the further continuation of a former fact, the second in the series of German attacks upon Slavonism. And all which in the previous period had been revealed as the psychological and political aspect of this struggle, now found its reflection in the activities of the Order: the same settling in other people's lands, the same clinging to its conquest, yet still greater love and cupidity for that which it had so far failed to conquer, the same never slackening recurrence of hostile operations, the same methods of struggle as in the former days. The Knights of the Cross became the spiritual heirs of those who half a thousand years before had struggled against other Slavs ; they became the synthesis and reflection of the guiding conceptions which had dominated the struggle of the previous German element against the Slavs.

And so when, after two centuries of the Knights' ruinous stay in Polish territory, the two antagonists clashed on the fields of Grunwald, in very truth it was no longer two armies only, no longer two States which confronted each other ; here two historic conceptions, the idea of German conquest and the idea of Slavonic defence of their own, the principle of violence and the idea of right, the conception of conquest and the principle of justice, struggled for the mastery. Rarely has so much basic spiritual content been revealed in a brutal physical struggle of weapons and bodies as was

revealed here, at Grunwald. And this battle was "great" not only in the military sense, but also as the conflict of two powerful historic ideas, basically opposed in their content. Once again victory weighted the scales on the side of right and justice. After many centuries of innumerable wrongs, of unpunished harrying of Slavs generally, and of Poland in particular, the hour of justice struck at last on the clock of history. A feeling of boundless relief and satisfaction, which is clearly to be distinguished in the voices of the day, overflowed all hearts, and it is difficult to say which gave the greater occasion for rejoicing: the splendid victory of arms and the political success, or the triumph of justice.

This triumph was gained by Poland, with the knighthood of her fraternal nations at her side. Beside the fifty Polish standards which waved at Grunwald there were forty standards of the Lithuanian and Ruthenian boyars; and, in addition to the mercenaries, there were volunteer forces from Bohemia and Moravia. We would not understand the essence of the matter if we evaluated this co-operation solely by the numerical strength of the participants or the military result of their action. For, as we know, the number of Czech and Moravian volunteers was small, and shortly after the battle began the Lithuanian troops and the majority of the Ruthenian forces were routed, and, taking to flight, did not return to the battlefield. Here the prime factor is the actual fact of the action jointly undertaken by representatives of several Slavonic nations and the Lithuanian nation, and their common service in the cause of the one common, great idea. It gave expression to the conviction that Grunwald was not merely a settlement of accounts between Poland and the Order, but a settlement of accounts between the entire Slavonic world and the German world for age-old wrongs; and that its results were of far-reaching importance not only to Poland itself, but also to all other Slavonic nations. The heroic struggle of the three standards of Smolensk, of those of the Ruthenian boyars who remained on the field of battle, was in a sense an expression of the idea, not always thoroughly realised, that the Teutonic Order's Pandora's Box, which had brought ruin to Poland, was in reality also packed with ruin for Ruthenia.

This common, Slavonic-Lithuanian deed was begun by Poland, and she also carried it through; she was its core. There is a kind of symbol in the circumstance that among the retinue assigned to guard Jagiello as he directed the military operations from a rise were not only chosen Polish knights, but also two Lithuanian-Ruthenian dukes and two Czech knights. Around the State standard of Poland and her ruler were gathered representatives of

them all. And Poland was not content only with the intellectual and spiritual leadership: Polish arms decided the battle itself. When the Lithuanian and Ruthenian troops took to flight, the Polish knights, taking up the heroic struggle, not only saved the battle when it was all but lost, but transformed it into a terrible, a complete annihilation of the enemy. And so the Grunwald triumph was in every respect a Polish deed; this brilliant, worthy page in the history of the Slavonic-German conflict was written first and foremost by Polish arms and in Polish blood. The phrase of the time rightly seized on that thought: "*Esne Polonorum cecidit gens Teutonicorum.*"

Strategically and politically it was not possible to exploit this victory at once; but a little later it brought an abundant fruit. Forty-and-four years after Grunwald an envoy of the Prussian estates stood before Jagiello's son in Cracow, offering him and the Polish crown the voluntary surrender of the lands conquered by the Knights of the Cross. It was rightly said that this was a second, a moral Polish Grunwald. But this second Grunwald would not have been possible if the first had been only a military success, even of the most brilliant nature. That first Grunwald must also have been an act of justice, and the State which accomplished that act must have marched forward under the standard of justice, seeing that the victors' standard now became the standard of protection and defence for the Prussian lands. And now for a second time the scale of events was weighted in favour of justice: despite the Order's desperate efforts, after a thirteen-year war the Treaty of Torun restored to Poland that which belonged to her.

These three temporally separated, ostensibly distinct events—the battle of Grunwald, the Homage at Cracow, and the Treaty of Torun—are now seen to be a complete, organically homogenous historical event, not only because each succeeding event followed from its predecessor, but also because all their character, both politically and ethically, was identical, and because in all three the same great historical conception was brought to realisation. Taken in the aggregate, they all three constitute a kind of single collective Grunwald.

Its most immediate consequence was the recovery of all the Polish lands which for two hundred and fifty years had been in the hands of the Order; and these lands were again incorporated in the organism of Poland; and together with them remnants of the Order's Prussian possessions, given in fiefdom by the Grand Master of the Order. But that was not the only result. Let us cast our

eyes over the further course of history, down to the Partitions of Poland. Here we meet with a notable feature: all the activity of the Grand Masters of the Order, and of their Prusso-Brandenburg heirs, was in principle confined to a single chief end: to a loosening or snapping of the bonds of feudal dependence, by which they were related to Poland as the result of the Treaty of Torun. This was the main question at issue in the days of the secularisation of Prussia during the reign of Sigismund I.; in the times of John Casimir the treaties of Oliwa expressed this one thought, and the final apotheosis of this idea was the Prussian coronation (two centuries later). From the viewpoint of Poland's interests this gradual process of Prussian emancipation was undoubtedly a negative feature, and one menacing to her future; but the Germans' aggressive activity ceased. Thenceforth the German element made no inroads on Poland's territorial integrity until the second half of the eighteenth century.

And this circumstance gives Grunwald the significance of a turning point, an event of epochal importance. Grunwald was not the first victory of Polish or Slavonic arms over the German enemy. There had been magnificent moments of military triumphs over the Germans by the Slavs of the Elbe, Boleslaw the Brave and the Wrymouthed had fought against them with success; Lokietek had defeated the Knights at Plowce. But after each of these successes the Germans at once renewed their struggle for conquest, their further pressure on Slavonic lands. Only now, after five hundred years in Poland, and after almost seven hundred years in the lands of the Northern Slavs, the resolute and for long effective watchword was heard for the first time: "Thus far, but no farther!" Grunwald first laid down a dam irremovable for three hundred and fifty years against the pressure of the German element.

It is this fact which constitutes it an event of prime and far-reaching importance.

What would have happened if the result of the battle had gone in favour of the Order? The Order already had several Polish lands under its rule; in past days it had temporarily ruled over others; frequently before this it had made inroads into the greater part of still other lands, not to mention its famous, destructive raids into Lithuania. All this provides us with an indication of the nature and trend of events if Grunwald had gone unfavourably for Poland. If Poland had then lost part of her lands, she would have been greatly weakened militarily and politically; and in face of this enfeeblement further losses would in turn have been possible.

Whether at some time in the future another victorious Grunwald would have come we do not know, but in any case it would have been more difficult. Even so, there was the danger that on the ruins of Polish State existence, just as once before on the lands of the Elbe Slavs, a continually stronger, continually more powerful German State organism would grow up, absorbing all the ancient Polish realms until it engulfed them entirely, and came into contact with a further Slavonic neighbour, in the East. And one cannot tell whether, having thus made contact with this neighbour, the Germans would have ceased from further conquests, any more than whether in the course of the armed struggle that neighbour would have risen to the achievement of a Grunwald. These two States, accordant and worthy of each other, who to-day raise their hands above Poland's head in order to subjugate her, might possibly have confronted each other as antagonists in a life and death struggle: one, at least, consequential in its pressure on Slavonic possessions, the other dissimulating and irrational, with the Slavonic standard in its hand, yet committing an infamous betrayal of the Slavonic cause by its barbarous oppression of Poland, through its tendency to destroy the Polish rampart which is its surest defence, and the destruction of which would open an abyss ominous and ruinous to that State itself.

So there is no exaggeration in saying that Grunwald saved Poland as a State, and simultaneously created a defensive rampart for the more distant Slavs. But it saved even more: it saved Polish nationality and culture. It was no mere chance that, among the letters which, after the battle, the King despatched with news of the victory, in addition to letters to the Queen and the Archbishop there was one to the Academy of Cracow. The German political conquests in Slavonic territories during the Middle Ages were commonly associated with the denationalisation of the Slavonic element. The Western Slavonic lands were already thoroughly Germanised by the time of Grunwald. A similar fate also met part of the Polish lands, which had come under the direct influence of the Germans, to mention only Silesia. The fate which became the lot of these lands also threatened other Polish tribes, if they had fallen under the domination of the Knights at this time. Polish culture and civilisation at the beginning of the fifteen century, though by no means last in the rank of cultures and civilisations, was still young, and so all the more supple and susceptible to outside influences. If the victorious Order had been able to apply its iron Germanisation system to them, they may have taken on the mould into which they were thrust: and the Polish spirit would have fled from that

mould. This danger, the most menacing of all, was removed by Grunwald: while for 350 years creating a steadfast barrier to the further advance of Germanism, it also gave our civilisation the possibility of independent development, and to our national spirit the possibility of strengthening and reinforcing its being. When later the days of Poland's partitions arrived, *politically* the fruits of Grunwald were destroyed: German rule was extended over part of Poland's lands. But the fruit which it brought to our *national idea*, to our *civilisation and culture*, was by then incapable of destruction. After the several centuries' protection which it provided for them, they had grown so strong and potent, they had rooted so strongly into their ground, they had acquired such definite shapes, that even the political fall of the State failed to destroy them, and, God grant, no further attempts of enemies will ever destroy them.

And so for us Grunwald is not only a memory of a triumph; it is down to this day, and it will be for centuries, a real value, an event, thanks to which a strong, *inviolable, immortal rock of Polish existence* was founded.

That rock *is our defence*, the only defence left to us. Therefore, we do not stand unarmed before our opponents; only the sword is lost to our hand. But, on the other hand, the other side possesses all the weapons: all those same weapons which for more than a thousand years have been tried out in the struggle against the Slavs, only rendered more perfect. There is still the instigation of one against another, without regard to means. There is still the method of colonisation, aimed at winning the native Polish land, only to-day it proceeds as a voluntary act of an economic nature, beneath which can be concealed a political act which is immoral in its very essence, and unworthy of present-day civilisation, because it tends towards the compulsory elimination of the ancient native population. There is also the weapon with which obedience is maintained, only the sword has been transformed into a bayonet, and from the palm of the knight it has passed to the hands of a sergeant, who gains a famous victory over fervently praying Polish children. This oppression, which does not even spare the infants, might be the measure of our suffering, if it were not for the fact that our suffering is boundless. At the memory of our former triumphs a desperate cry, "Fuimus troes," rises in a painful groan from our breasts. A desperate, yet not a hopeless cry. From the granite rock which Polish existence has created all the darts recoil shattered, and in the hell of oppression which is prepared for us so much fire has been consumed that the hell itself will be burnt out, and the

hour of justice will strike. For such an hour it is necessary to wait entire centuries by the clock of history ; but God is in his Heaven, and so the clock does not stop. But although this boundless depth of suffering through which fate is leading us would suffice to expunge all our sins, even the greatest that we have committed in the past, or may commit to-day, we, in expectation of that hour, ask anxiously whether all those sins are remitted us, and what others have yet to be remitted, remembering, like the Polish knights at Grunwald, that our own expiation leads to the just victory.

And for this reason to-day, as half a thousand years ago, now no longer from the thousands of breasts of Poland's knighthood, but from the millions of hearts of the nation, up to the throne of Our Queen flows the humble, imploring, Grunwald hymn:

“Holy Virgin Mother of God

Through Thy Son the Lord,

That our sins may be forgiven! ”



Biblioteka Główna AP w Siedlcach
nr inw.: BR - 23773



br.23773