

Benjámín Borbás: The social aspects of wars of the Teutonic Knights in Baltics

‘Explicit bellum Prussie. Incipit bellum Letthowinorum.’ As the chronicler Peter von Dusburg noted the Teutonic Knights finally subjugated the pagan Prussians in 1283 after launching numerous campaigns against them. However, fighting for the faith was far from over. The pagan Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a fearful enemy of the Teutonic Order and the Knights was determined to break and to Christianize it. The key point in this war for the Knights was to conquer the land of Samogitia, loyal to the Lithuanians, in order to create a corridor between their separated territories, Prussia and Livonia. Despite its territorial expansion, for decades the grand duchy has been engaged in a cruel conflict labelled as ‘the other Hundred Years’ War’. In 1385, the Union of Krewo by a personal union brought Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila to Polish throne, uniting two significant powers in the region against the Teutonic Order. After 24 years of Krewo Union Poland-Lithuania and the Teutonic Knights faced each in the so-called ‘Great War’ (1409-1411) which culminated in the Battle of Grünwald 1410.

In my paper, I examine the social base and international character of wars waged by the Teutonic Knights. I focus on the background of these campaigns in order to define those social strata who took part in these conflicts. Teutonic campaigns against pagans were called ‘*Reysa*’ (reisen-to travel) and was a popular fighting experience offered to the European nobility. It is interesting to examine and analyze how the consistency of participants on both sides has changed in time, as well as the methods the Knights used in order to advertise these ventures among their potential supporters to recruit new crusaders. Which were the main motivating factors behind these campaigns, and how shifts in this motivation made an effect on the goals and composition of the combatants? ‘*Reysen*’ were crusades against the last pagans in Europe but at the same time a training ground of fighting nobility and – from a Lithuanian point of view – a bitter struggle for self-defence against invaders. Thus, the paper will also reveal how these fights divided the Lithuanian aristocracy according to the interest of individuals and how reunited them in the case of necessity, which was followed by the union with Poland.