

THE 13TH-CENTURY CONQUEST OF PRUSSIA RECONSIDERED

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Nineteenth and 20th-century historiography about the conquest of Prussia in the 13th century by the Teutonic Order, based on the different circumstances forming the political, cultural and historical memory developing in different historical epochs and in a varied geographical space, formed a rather clear point of view that the conquest of Prussia was the expansion of Western Christianity, breaking through in the form of crusades, and interrupting the natural development of the West Balts (mainly Old Prussians), which caused the disappearance of the Old Prussians. There is no doubt that, like any other forms of war, the conquest naturally triggered change, both in the society of the conquered and of the conquerors. For a long time, the conquest of the Old Prussians was researched by looking only at the military-political aspects: battles, a discussion of strategy and tactics, the visualisation of the cartography of battles, and the location of Old Prussian castles, highlighting the political circumstances of the arrival of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, descriptions of the ideological attitudes of the Crusades, and descriptions of the hostilities. As well as the military-political aspects, researchers paid significant attention to the pre-Christian order of Old Prussian society, its religion and mythology, confronting the 'peaceful', 'not damaged by civilisation' Old Prussian culture with the aggressive attitude of the Teutonic Order and the supporters of Christian European culture, and in this way, through invisible ties, relating the conquest of Prussia in the 13th century to events of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In other words, the conquest of the Old Prussians in the 13th century has long been a tool in the ideological battle forming the perception by society in the 19th and 20th centuries of the idea of what the Teutonic Order and its successors in Prussia were, and who the Old Prussians and other enslaved societies living on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea region were. During the Cold War, those who took an exceptionally negative view of the activities of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, and those with a more neutral attitude towards the activities of the Order, used more or less politicised and

ideologised arguments against each other. Only in the 1970s, after a dialogue between German and Polish intellectuals (mainly historians) began, did the stereotypes about the activities of the Teutonic Order in Prussia begin to be broken down.¹ Unfortunately, occupied and sovietised Lithuania could not join in this debate (like the Soviet Union, but for different reasons). This dialogue (among other reasons) not only allowed research on issues of the history of the Teutonic Order in Prussia to be activated, but also research on the Old Prussian tribes before and after the conquest. To be more exact, the history of the Old Prussians and the role of the Teutonic Order in Prussia became a subject of research not only for German historians, but for Polish historians as well, and several centres were established researching the issue of the Old Prussians and the role of the Teutonic Order in Prussia.

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In Lithuania there are just a few individual researchers who are interested in the history of the Old Prussians and the activities of the Teutonic Order in Prussia (and its branch in Livonia). Therefore, every book about the history of the Old Prussians and the Teutonic Order in Prussia is a rather significant event not only in Germany and Poland, but in Lithuania as well.

The book presented here is written by a young author: it is a monograph based on a dissertation by Alicija Dobrosielska, a student of the late Professor Grzegorz Białuński (it is with great sorrow that we announce this), about the relationship between the Old Prussians and the Teutonic Order in the 13th century, when the conquest of Prussia took place. As the author emphasises in the introduction, the issue of the value priorities of the Old Prussians, how they behaved, and what they did as the conquest began, is addressed in the book. This question is intriguing, and rather new in historiography, since most attention is paid to the conquest itself, and not to an evaluation of values.

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, a summary (in German), a list of literary and historical sources, and an index of names. Instead of a foreword, a speech is presented by Gustaw Marek Brzezina, the Marshal of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship. In the introduction, as is customary, the author presents the research question itself, and discusses the sources and the main positions concerning the evaluation of the conquest of Prussia and its treatment in research literature. But what is more important, she presents actual changes which began in Old Prussian society and culture by relating them to the history of culture, and to theoretical insights into anthropology, which are a foundation stone when presenting and giving the basis for the methodology of the book. Since the aim was to look at the axiological side of the conquests, the author speaks about the change of symbols in Old Prussian society, and the role of culture, against the background of

¹ Cf. BOOCKMANN, Hartmut. *Der Deutsche Orden: Zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte*. München, 1999, Kap. 12.

the conquest by the Teutonic Order (see Chapter 1). Having stated this, not only are 'real realia' recorded in historical sources, showing the conquest of the Old Prussians, their resistance, and the adaptation and the cooperation of the Teutonic Order itself, but we can also envision in the sources the semiotic aspect, the transference of the symbols *universum* from one (pre-Christian) society to another (already Christian) level. The author devotes the entire chapter to research into methodology, taking as a basis the concepts of social reality described by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (presented to the public in 1966).² Rather a lot of attention is paid to social roles and the factors forming the identity particularly in this concept. And that influenced behaviour itself, for example, what is expected from society. The social groups 'rightfully' organise themselves to meet these expectations, that is, the social role forms the identity of the individual, but it is not clear how society itself organises itself so 'rightfully' *per se*. The mental world of those who adapted to the Teutonic Order in Prussia was created taking this point of view into account: they organised themselves 'rightfully', and behaved the way the Teutonic Order expected them to, even though that did not mean that such conformists, by 'rightfully' performing their social roles, did not have any aims concerning the old (pre-Christian) culture, society and symbols (see Chapter 3). Here, we can undoubtedly see the psychological component of the perception of the social role, but the author, realising this, purposely does not analyse that component.

It is important to emphasise that in the whole concept of the creation of the social reality presented by Berger and Luckmann, the social reality, provided for the new generation, is taken as 'real knowledge', as a reality taken for granted, the functioning of which just needs to be understood and 'mastered'. It means that by performing some kind of action, the action become 'recognisable' to other members of society, and identification with it begins. Taking into account this point of view, all those who resisted the Teutonic Order performed actions which were 'recognised' as symbols and phenomena of the old prevailing order before that. And on the contrary, those who immediately took the side of the Teutonic Order (were baptised and adopted the Christian way of life, etc), began to manifest symbols and phenomena of the new society, which did not identify with the old order (more about this in Chapter 4). At that time, the conformists played their new social roles flawlessly in the eyes of the new society; however, they did not always 'honestly' add to the deconstruction of the pre-Christian symbols, that is, their indifference, which was characteristic of this group of people, did not allow them to engage more actively in the creation of the new society and the symbols declared by the collaborators and allies of the Teutonic Order in Prussia. On the other hand, this indifference permitted the retention of cer-

² BERGER, Peter L.; LUCKMANN, Thomas. *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, 1966.

tain rudiments of the old culture in the mentality (see Chapter 3). The question certainly arises, how predominant in Prussia were these rudiments of the old culture, identical to the old culture itself, until the conquest by the Teutonic Order?

With regard to the transfer of the social reality (together with its new symbols) from generation to generation (which Berger and Luckmann refer to), a natural question still arises, partly related to the methodology chosen by the author herself. How was this social reality received by the very first generation of Old Prussians, and what is more important, *how* and *to what degree* did this first generation of Old Prussians add to the creation of new social phenomena in society, on the understanding that it remains unclear *which* new social phenomena were really 'new' in this society, and to *whom*, to which part of society, those social phenomena were 'new'. For example, having conquered Prussia, the Christians offered or imposed on the Old Prussians their symbols and the reality of their perception of the world; hence, social phenomena were not new to them. Were these symbols and this reality of the perception of the world 'new' to the Old Prussians? This question remains open as well. The author herself says that the Old Prussians had encountered Christianity before the conquest by the Teutonic Order; hence, the symbols and the phenomena of the new society, declared by the members of Christian society, were not totally new, even to the pagan Old Prussians. Here, it is worth coming back to idea of the Polish medievalist Henryk Łowmiański that pagan culture and religion could possibly have been influenced by Christianity as a monotheistic religion. Certainly, the researcher applies this idea when speaking about the Polabian Slavs in the tenth to the 12th centuries, not the Balts.³ Still, we cannot ignore the possibility that the pagan Balts could have experienced some kind of influence from Christianity long before the 13th century. These circumstances make us believe that, for the creation of the new society, new symbols and phenomena manifesting the new order were not enough for the creation of the new social reality. In Old Prussian society itself, even in the 11th and 12th centuries, significant changes took place, which at first sight had nothing in common with Christianity, the new society, etc.

Of course, if we speak about the creation of new institutions in Prussia, and about the (non)engagement of the local elite in their work, we have to admit that, having arrived together with Christianity, the new order changed the situation that used to be before; only, we should not consider that situation as static, as not changing for centuries. To be more exact, we should say that, following in the footsteps of Berger and Luckmann, the social reality is a means for a certain self-identification (recognition, identifying), providing the possibility for the consolidation of a certain society/culture. To put it another way, every generation has its 'own' social reality, and even the norms of social behaviour, seemingly so established, can change unexpectedly,

³ ŁOWMIAŃSKI, Henryk. *Religia słowian i jej upadek (VI–XII w.)*. Warszawa, 1979, s. 190–195, 239–263.

despite the fact that there is a requirement for new members of society to learn already well-known 'truths', which a new generation is bound not to question.

The researcher encounters the 'changing antiquity'; as a member of society, he always appeals to 'the old good law', even though a new law has just been passed. Not accidentally, lawyers speak about 'the spirit of the law'. This 'spirit' is what remains, even though the content and the actions to reach that content change. Thus, the 'spirit' remains, but each generation understands that 'spirit' in its own way, somehow in a different way to previous generations. Is that 'somehow in a different way' a novelty which creates the social reality? For example, having adopted Christian customs, did the Old Prussians have to reject their previous customs only because the Christian Church demanded it, or because a certain adaptation to the well-known laws of the Christians took place, according to the well-known *consensus fidelium* principle of law, considering the newly baptised as the same dependents of the Teutonic Order as those who had arrived from different regions of Europe? We will certainly not be able to answer this question without special research.

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Another thing is more important. The author applies the concept of Berger and Luckmann in describing the modern social reality (and through it, its symbols and values) to the 13th century, that is, to pre-modern times. On one hand, this allows the author to distinguish three main groups of Old Prussians, which, in one way or another, had relations with the Teutonic Order in Prussia: 1) those not adapted to the emerging new reality, who were fighting the Teutonic Order; 2) those who adopted a halfway relationship with the Teutonic Order, by adapting to the new order in a passive way; and 3) those who cooperated actively with the Teutonic Order. In principle, in return for their conformism and collaboration, the latter two groups received different social guarantees, privileges and concessions from the Teutonic Order. On the other hand, the appearance of these groups (with sub-groups, indicated by the author) could be predetermined not only and not so much by the new order with its *universum* of symbols, but rather by the changes in Old Prussian society and its culture, having taken place before, which should also be taken into consideration.

For example, in the Treaty of Christburg (February 1249), there is a discussion about the right of Old Prussian noblemen to become knights. Knighthood itself (as a phenomenon of the law in the first place), it goes without saying, was a new event in the Old Prussian social order. However, the mental and cultural perceptions of knighthood, conferring honour, prestige and uniqueness in society, could hardly be a totally new thing for the Old Prussians. Perceptions of honour, social uniqueness and prestige were characteristics of the Old Prussian noblemen, only the conditions where this perception could be revealed were of a different kind. The essence of this novelty was that, through knighthood and other privileges, converts were made equal to

the 'old-timers' of the new order, thereby distinguishing them from the rest of the masses (conformists as well). The same holds true when speaking about satisfaction concerning the right of their sons (and daughters) to inherit land, which should be related not only to the establishment of the new order (Christian marriage), but also to the final establishment of individual agriculture (allodium), by removing from the more distant relatives the right to inherit property, that is, by affirming the agnatic principle of inheritance, and this process had begun even before the conquest of Prussia by the Teutonic Order. To be more exact, when the expectations of the Old Prussians (basically arising from the old order) matched the attitudes of the old order, then adaptation to the new order took place more freely, without major clashes.

The majority of value provisions adopted by the conformists (see Chapter 3) should be looked upon in this way. It was easier for them to adapt, not only because they were ready to accept their social role without much objection for the sake of a peaceful life, but probably because part of society 'mentally' tends to adapt to the changing world, rather than resort actively to resistance or active collaboration with the enemy. The phenomenon of adaptation itself had probably existed successfully, and still successfully exists, in the social realities of all times. For example, from the point of view of Christianity, any henotheism, as well as monolatry, is a kind of conformism, which can be tolerated before the adoption of baptism, after which all honour, rituals and devotion are dedicated to one God. For the pagan, both henotheism and monolatry were a 'customary' state, due to the polytheistic nature of paganism. For such conformists, the adoption of one more god was just a 'rational calculation'; therefore, the novelty was not that there was a requirement to receive the Christian God itself, but that in receiving the Christian God, there was a requirement to forget other gods, and no longer acknowledge their meaning. This forgetting, or to be more exact, rejection, was a new value provision imposed on converts. The rejected old gods 'took away' with themselves the old rituals and practices, which the monotheistic Christianity could not recognise.⁴

In other words, the henotheistic attitudes towards Christ could possibly have been known and acceptable to the Old Prussians (and the other Balts, surrounded by Christian lands on all sides). However, the system of the new values and symbols consisted not only of the already-known Christian God, but also of the principal rejection of the old gods imposed by the Christian Church, which the first generation of Old Prussians had to survive while confronting the Teutonic Order. There remains, then, the question of whether the problem of henotheism, belonging to the old system and confronting the new system, confronted generations of Old Prussians living

⁴ For more, see: ŠČAVINSKAS, Marius. The Christianisation of the Past (the example of Baltic Society in the High Middle Ages). *Quaestiones Medii aevi novae*, vol. 22: *Medieval Scandinavia; Culture savante et politique*. Warszawa, 2017, pp. 365–368.

after the second half of the 13th century; in other words, whether succeeding generations of Old Prussians encountered the same conditions for creating the social reality as the first one, until the middle of the 13th century, when the conquest of Sambia took place; or if, in the context of the creation of the concept of the social reality, the conditions for the creation of that social reality were different? In other words, how long do the new symbols and phenomena remain new? Does it take one generation, or more?

Perhaps not accidentally, the author writes in her monograph about a certain crisis of values in Old Prussian society, which became more evident during the first and second uprisings by the Old Prussian tribes against the Teutonic Order, when those who collaborated with the Teutonic Order adopted the new *universum* of symbols much faster and more clearly than the conformists, not to mention those who fought against the Teutonic Order and received baptism much later than the collaborators or those who were killed. The important conclusion made by the author is that the so-called modernisation of Old Prussian society took place not only influenced by outside forces (the Teutonic Order), but also by the Old Prussians themselves. These Old Prussians became creators of the new society in Prussia ruled by the Teutonic Order.

The Swedish medievalist Nils Blomkvist, while researching the 'westernisation' of the Baltic Sea region in the 12th and 13th centuries, discerned two forms of 'europeanisation' of Christian Europe: compromise (gradual adaptation), and conflict (revolutions).⁵ The societies of Scandinavian Vikings allegedly adapted to the new challenges, hence they chose compromise. Meanwhile, the societies of Livonia chose conflict. The Baltic region was 'europeanised' in both ways, except that the consequences of these 'europeanisations' were not the same for different societies: for some nations in Livonia, 'europeanisation' entailed disappearance, and the creation of a different 'Livonian' society, which was German by nature. Meanwhile, the Swedes, having chosen a different way, consolidated their statehood and all the privileges provided by Christianity. Dobrosielska, essentially also speaking about forms of conflict and adaptation which the Old Prussians, living under occupation by the Teutonic Order, had to go through, expands the horizon of 'europeanisation' and modernisation to the field of choice of Old Prussian provisions of values and symbols. In order to realise what the conquest of the Old Prussians in the 13th century was, and what kind of changes were programmed by this conquest, we eventually need to resort to a 'mental map' of the conquest. The monograph by Dobrosielska adds significantly to the knowledge of this 'map'.

⁵ BLOMKVIST, Nils. *The Discovery of the Baltic. The Reception of a Catholic World-System in the European North (AD 1075–1125)* (The Northern World. North Europe and the Baltic c. 400–1700 AD. Peoples, Economies and Cultures, vol. 15). Leiden, Boston, 2005, pp. 119, 286–287.