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Nicolaus Copernicus, War with the Teutonic Order in 1521

Abstract

Nicolaus Copernicus is primarily recorded in collective memory as the creator of the heliocentric theory contained in the monumental treatise *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, printed in 1543 in Nuremberg.¹ Earlier, in 1526, he finished editing *Monete Cudende Ratio*;² the second, German-translated version of this treatise was presented in person by Copernicus on March 21, 1522, at a convention of the states of Royal Prussia in Grudziadz, where monetary reform was discussed. The article presents the astronomer's achievements in the military field, namely his participation in the fortification of the Olsztyn fortress during the war with the Teutonic Order in 1521.³

Just like other wars with the Teutonic Order, this conflict also stemmed from the struggle for dominance over the Baltic Sea basin (*Dominium Maris Baltici*), Poland's vital window to the world. As usual, the Order ensured that the dispute would transcend the scale of a mere neighborhood quarrel and instead take on the dimensions of a regional power struggle. In the years leading up to the war, Grand Master Albrecht Hohenzollern succeeded in forming an anti-Polish coalition with Emperor Maximilian I and Moscow. The emperor was at odds with the Polish king over a potential succession to the

thrones of Bohemia and Hungary, while Moscow was already engaged in war with Lithuania. Moreover, Denmark had its own interest in weakening all the parties involved in the conflict. For its part, the Polish crown hoped to dispatch the unruly vassal who had remained under Polish suzerainty since the Second Peace of Toruń in 1466 to the southeastern frontier, where he could be directed against the Turks. The Papacy, meanwhile, opposed any internal conflicts among Catholic monarchs, given the ongoing plans to assemble a grand anti-Turkish coalition. Caught in the midst of these geopolitical tensions was Warmia, a bishopric within Polish territory, where Nicolaus Copernicus served as a canon. At that time, his responsibilities brought him to the town of Olsztyn.

As established by the respected historian Marian Biskup, on January 26th, 1521, a Teutonic unit from Dobre Miasto, commanded by Wilhelm von Schaumburg, set out toward Olsztyn in an attempt to reclaim cattle previously taken near the walls of their town. Under Schaumburg's leadership, the mercenaries encountered a Polish cavalry detachment near Olsztyn, which they defeated, capturing their horses. The Teutonic troops then launched a sudden attempt to breach the town gates. They succeeded in breaking through the outer gate, but lacking scaling ladders, they

¹ *Nicolai Copernici Torinensis de Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium. Libri VI*, Nuremberg, published by Johann Petreius, A.D. 1543.

² M. Copernicus, *Monete Cudende Ratio*, ed. M. Targowski, Toruń 2023

³ The fundamental studies remain those by M. Biskup: *On the Threat to Olsztyn by Teutonic Troops in Early 1521*, "Komunikaty Warmińsko-Mazurskie" 1, 1971, pp. 139–145; idem, *The "Prussian War" or the War Between Poland and the Teutonic Order in the Years 1519–1521 as the Origin of the Secularization of the Teutonic Prussia*, Oświęcim 2019, p. 375. On the above-mentioned conflict, see also: M. Biskup, *The Wars of Poland with the Teutonic Order 1309–1521*, Oświęcim 2019, pp. 289–363. See also: Ch. Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century*, London 2018, p. 168 ff

were unable to climb the walls or penetrate the city. Schaumburg was reportedly prepared to mount another assault on Olsztyn on the condition that firearms, gunpowder, and a gunner⁴ could be delivered from Königsberg or Orneta.

Of course, to Warmia and Olsztyn, the threat of war had already existed for some time. However, this particular campaign was fought in the European style, one that Albrecht Hohenzollern had become familiar with during his military campaign in Italy alongside Emperor Maximilian I. Mercenary forces carried out mobile raids to seize enemy strongholds and secure advantageous positions for future offensives. By the autumn of 1520, the situation had become increasingly dire. In mid-October, Teutonic mercenaries invaded central Warmia and, beginning on October 19th, laid siege to Lidzbark Warmiński. During the siege, Grand Master Albrecht detached a force composed of three companies of infantry, cavalry units, and artillery to capture Dobre Miasto. The town was defended by a garrison of 200 Polish and Czech mercenaries, while Canon Fabian Emerich led the defense of the collegiate church. During the assault and subsequent firefight, 70 Teutonic mercenaries were killed, and their commander, Captain Sigismund von Sichau, died eight days later from a gunshot wound to the leg. The second assault proved successful: Orneta surrendered after an eight-day siege. In light of these events, Nicolaus Copernicus and the canons gathered at the castle in Olsztyn addressed the following letter to the King of Poland:

To the Most Serene Lord and Sovereign, Most Gracious Lord.

We humbly commend our most loyal services to Your Sacred Majesty.

Last evening, the enemies of Your Royal

Majesty seized the stronghold of Dobre Miasto, which, though fairly well protected by walls, was left with an insufficient garrison. This event justly fills us with alarm, for we ourselves are not fortified against such an attack, and we fear that the enemy, now already so near, may soon lay siege to us as well. With us here is the noble-born Lord Paweł Dołuski, accompanied by merely one hundred armed men. At our request, he wrote several days ago to Lidzbark, to the honorable Lord Jakub Sęczygniewski, commander of Your Royal Majesty's forces, imploring him to send a larger garrison. The people of Dobre Miasto likewise petitioned him, yet none of us has received assistance. His reply was that he had too few men himself to dispatch any reinforcements. Yet we are keenly aware that danger now threatens not only Lidzbark, but indeed the entire Bishopric of Warmia. Therefore, we most humbly beseech Your Sacred Majesty to hasten to our aid and to send support both swiftly and effectively. We are resolved to act in a manner befitting noble and honorable men, wholly devoted to Your Majesty, even if it should cost us our lives. To Your Majesty's protection we entrust all our possessions, and indeed ourselves. From Olsztyn, on the 16th day of November, in the Year of Our Lord 1520.

Your Sacred Royal Majesty's

most faithfully devoted servants,

the Canons and the Chapter of the Church of Warmia.

To the Most Serene Lord and Sovereign, Lord Sigismund, by the Grace of God King of Poland, Grand Duke of Lithuania, Lord and Heir of Ruthenia and Prussia, etc., our Most Gracious Lord.⁵

It is generally accepted that this letter was written in Copernicus's own hand on November

⁴ M. Biskup, *On the Threat to Olsztyn by Teutonic Troops in Early 1521*, "Komunikaty Warmińsko-Mazurskie" 1, 1971, p. 144; idem, *The "Prussian War" or the War Between Poland and the Teutonic Order in the Years 1519–1521 as the Origin of the Secularization of the Teutonic Prussia*, Oświęcim 2019, p. 375.

⁵ Quoted after: M. Biskup, *A Letter from the Warmian Chapter to King Sigismund I*, Handwritten by Nicolaus Copernicus in Olsztyn in 1520, pp. 313–314.

16, 1520. However, it is also assumed that it never reached its intended recipient.⁶

Despite the failure of the plea to elicit a timely response, the town and castle of Olsztyn managed to avoid direct assault. The conflict gradually subsided, and in April of 1521 a truce was signed between the Kingdom of Poland and the Teutonic Order, marking the end of active hostilities in the region. Copernicus remained in Olsztyn during this time, overseeing the town's defenses and administrative matters on behalf of the Warmian Chapter. His actions during the conflict, both logistical and organizational, demonstrate his competence not only in scholarly and administrative duties, but also in military preparedness. This lesser-known episode of his life enriches our understanding of Copernicus as a committed public servant and capable leader in times of crisis.

Nevertheless, the situation of the garrison at Olsztyn Castle, then reinforced by Paweł Dołuski's unit, was not as bad as it could have been. In the second half of November, the garrison was joined by an infantry company under the command of Henryk Peryk of Janowice. Additionally, in December, a sizeable cavalry unit led by Zbigniew Słupecki appeared in the region of Olsztyn. It was likely these latter forces who conducted a raid to recover cattle from the vicinity of Dobre Miasto. On Christmas Day of 1520, Copernicus wrote a letter to the Archdeacon of Warmia, Jan Sculteti, then residing in Elbląg, requesting firearms (arquebuses), lead, paper, and salt.⁷ He followed up with additional letters, emphasizing his expectation of cooperation from the recipient. Having received no reply, and as the route was previously too dangerous, Copernicus eventually decided, in mid-February, to dispatch Canon Henryk Snellenberg. On his journey, however,

Snellenberg missed a reply that had finally been sent by Sculteti.⁸

In his letter, Sculteti reassured Copernicus that the Teutonic forces were currently preoccupied elsewhere and urged him to endure a little longer. He also advised the administrator not to rush into spending funds before learning the current market prices. Should Copernicus have intended to purchase provisions, he would have need to send wagons loaded with linen, cloth, wax, and honey, goods that were in high demand at the time. Within two days, the archdeacon managed to procure two wagons with drivers and seventeen arquebuses, which arrived in Olsztyn within another two days.

As we can see, firearms were highly coveted by both attackers and defenders. Gunpowder weapons were becoming increasingly effective instruments of warfare and deterrence. At this point, it is worth recalling that during the Polish military expedition of 1519, the army possessed *kartouwen* (siege cannons) weighing up to 2.8 metric tons and capable of firing 16-kilogram iron projectiles. During the siege of Pasłęk, an untrained gunner damaged the largest of these cannons, prompting the hiring of experienced specialists. In contrast, during the siege of Kwidzyn in 1520, the Teutonic garrison surrendered after just a single day of artillery fire.

Indeed, operating firearms posed a serious challenge, and both sides of the conflict sought qualified gunners from abroad, in the Holy Roman Empire and Bohemia. Another persistent issue was the gunpowder itself. The *hakownica* (a type of early firearm) derives its name from the metal hook mounted beneath the barrel, which stabilized the weapon and mitigated the risks associated with inconsistent gunpowder mixtures, known to detonate unpredictably.

⁶ M. Biskup, op. cit., p. 309.

⁷ Ibidem, no. 221. The letter has not been preserved, as can be inferred from the content of Sculteti's letter to Copernicus from late February 1521. The letter remained unanswered, since the addressee received it only at the end of February 1521, as he himself mentions. See: J. Sikorski, *Nicolaus Copernicus in Warmia: Chronology of His Life and Work [part 2]*, "Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie" 3, 1966, p. 446.

⁸ Snellenberg missed Sculteti's response to Copernicus's letter and arrived in Elbląg shortly after February 15 — see: ibidem, p. 448.

Waging war with mercenary forces and modern equipment was costly. The royal treasury spent PLN 300,000, drawing on loans and pledges. The city of Gdańsk contributed an additional PLN 133,000. The Teutonic Order, for its part, had to allocate PLN 80,000 per quarter to maintain its 5,500-strong mercenary force, an enormous expense compared to the Grand Master's annual revenue of just PLN 12,000. The war ultimately concluded through extended peace negotiations and culminated in the so-called Prussian Homage of 1525.

The events of 1521 and the role played by Nicolaus Copernicus would later be appropriated for ideological purposes during Poland's communist era. In 1971, during

Copernican celebrations held at Olsztyn Castle, Tadeusz Białkowski, First Secretary of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), declared:

"Nicolaus Copernicus was not only a great scholar and humanist. He was also a great Pole and patriot, who, when duty called, was able to rise above his beloved scientific pursuits and his passion as a meticulous economist and social thinker, to assume the burden of civic responsibility. It was he who prepared and led the defense of Olsztyn against the last Teutonic incursion upon our land and town. Within the walls of this castle, the idea of a patriotic uprising of the people of Olsztyn was born.⁹"

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⁹ *Wydarzenia z 26 stycznia 1521 roku*, 2021. <https://muzeum.olsztyn.pl/5621,wydarzenia-z-26-stycznia-1521-roku.html> [dostęp: 14.07.2025 roku].