

## CHARACTERISTICS OF WARFARE IN THE TIMES OF HENRY OF LIVONIA AND BALTHASAR RUSSOW

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze and compare warfare during the Crusader conquest of Estonia and Livonia (1198-1227) and the Livonian Wars (1558-1582) based on two primary sources — *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* and Balthasar Russow's *Livonian Chronicle*. The subject is worth exploring since it has not been dealt with adequately. The political history is well known, but warfare is often described as two sides meeting with one side emerging victorious. The outcome was certainly influenced by tactics, equipment and weaponry used by the participants, as well as climate and geography.

Henry of Livonia was born around 1188 in Saxony. He went to Livonia in 1205 where he was ordained a priest in 1208 and was still living among the Letts in 1259. Balthasar Russow was born before 1536 in Reval, probably as the son of an Estonian citizen.<sup>1</sup> He was the Lutheran pastor of the Estonian congregation at the Holy Spirit Church in Reval from 1566 until his death in 1600. Henry, like other clergy involved with the Livonian mission, did not hesitate to join in battle when needed. Alerted of an enemy host approaching, Henry records, "We immediately put down the holy chrism and the other holy articles, and hurried to the ministry of shields and swords."<sup>2</sup>

The Chronicles differ in substantial ways. Henry writes in Latin and records the establishment of the Livonian church from 1184 to 1227; Russow writes in Low German and records the history of Livonia from 1158 with emphasis on the contemporary period, i.e. the decline of the Livonian Order and the Livonian Wars. Henry wrote his chronicle in 1227 most likely as a report on the Livonian mission for the Papal legate. Russow profited from his chronicle. Printed in Rostock in 1578, it quickly sold out, and a second printing was done that same year. A revised and updated edition sold well in 1584.

Henry's aim is to show how God works through men and events to bring history into conformity with His preordained plan. For Russow, catastrophe is brought upon the Baltic Germans by their own doing — the Russians are sent by God as a scourge for Livonian decadence. Russow's bias is that of a loyal citizen of Reval, and he therefore identifies the Swedes as the positive force, especially because they will preserve the Lutheran faith and Reval's privileges.

The most common words that Henry uses to detail the end result of a native campaign are "loot", "booty", and "captives". This meant horses, flocks, herds, furs, weapons, metal goods, and slaves, and accurately describes the goals of indigenous warfare. To these material aims must be added the psychological desires of prestige for the warrior and revenge for past injuries against his kin. To the natives, the idea of territorial conquest was alien and would have been difficult to achieve in any case because of the looseness of their political organization.

Each Estonian village had an elder. Villages formed districts which were governed by a council of elders. Likewise, districts banded together to form provinces for defense purposes that were governed by councils of district elders. There was no higher authority since the concept of an Estonian nation was unknown. Hence, Estonians went into battle by province, led by their own elders. Usually a specific province would be attacked by foreigners and had to make peace or retaliate by itself. Sometimes the provinces would raid each other, but more often they would band together to fight outsiders. Occasionally, an important elder would be the leader of a military campaign, as was Lembitu in 1217 when he summoned the men of all the provinces and the Russians of Novgorod to come together to fight the Crusaders.<sup>3</sup>

Since the goal of native warfare was usually booty and prisoners, the most vital tactic was surprise. Pitched battles were avoided, and time was not wasted on besieging forts. A raiding party was typically away for nine to fourteen days, rarely met a defending force, and if it was intercepted it was usually on the ride home. To achieve surprise the warriors arrived on horseback, however, they were not cavalry, so they dismounted to fight. When two armies did face each other, they would

yell their battle cries and bang their shields to build up their morale and intimidate the enemy. Battles involved the throwing of light spears and the shooting of arrows as a prelude to a general advance where men struck each other with swords, axes, and clubs until one side weakened and fled.

According to Henry, only girls were spared death by raiders because the pagans, "were accustomed to visit many hardships upon their captives, both the young women and virgins, at all times, by violating them and taking them as wives, each taking two or three or more of them."<sup>4</sup>

The most generally used weapon was the 1.75 meter spear.<sup>5</sup> Spears were made for two uses, either for jabbing or smaller and lighter for throwing. The axe, an everyday tool, was the other common weapon. A more expensive weapon was the double-edged broadsword that had an iron blade one meter long, a narrow, straight crossguard, and a rounded triangular pommel. Also utilized were shorter, single-edged swords, half a meter in length, and bows made of juniper and arrows with slender iron heads. Henry writes, "Estonians were not accustomed to use armor as other nations do."<sup>6</sup> Their primary protection was a wooden shield covered with leather.

The first group of outsiders who sought to bring armed force into the East Baltic area were German and Scandinavian merchants based on Gothland who wanted protection for themselves and their goods. As the Eastern Baltic was the last remaining non-Christian area of Europe, this initiative was welcomed by the Catholic Church which was also worried about the possible spread of Eastern Orthodoxy. In 1199, Pope Innocent III announced that those who went to crusade in Livonia would receive the same remission of sins as the pilgrims to Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

In 1202, Albert, the Bishop of Riga, established the crusading order called the Brothers of the Militia of Christ, popularly known as the Swordbrothers because of their red insignia of a cross and a sword. The Order was needed to garrison forts and provide year-round defense for the mission because the typical crusader was a seasonal warrior who returned home to Germany for the winter. A Brother took a vow of poverty, chastity, obedience, and war against the enemies of the Church. He could not lose: he either won victory over the pagans or, if he was killed, salvation.

Bishop Albert used the principle "divide and conquer" to defeat the native tribes. Ancient animosities between some tribes were greater than their hatred of the Crusaders who provided security against raids by neighboring tribes and whose support assured a tribe of success for its own raids. Coupled with the advantage that advanced arms and armor gave the Crusaders, this formula resembles the conquest of the New World contemporary to Russow. The crossbow used by the Crusaders was a bow set transversely on a grooved wooden stock designed to hold an arrow. The user placed his foot in a metal stirrup at the front of the bow and looped a hook from his belt around the bowstring and used his weight to pull it back. Fired by a trigger, the bolt could go through the bodies of three men and pierce armor (mail). The lance or spear, used by almost all combatants, was utilized more effectively by the Crusaders. The natives dismounted to fight, but the Crusader cavalry used a heavier lance to charge through the enemy. Thus, the knights could be called the tanks of the thirteenth century because of their superior mobility, offensive role, and armor protection.

The Crusaders utilized mail, which consisted of interlocking metal rings usually in the form of a hauberk and a long shirt that almost reached the knees and covered the head but left the face bare. The sleeves ended in mittens and the legs were protected by separate mail hose. The head was further protected by a helm of the "pot" style — a descriptive word. It had a flat top, two slits for eyes, and a few tiny holes around the mouth area.

Knightly warfare, however, was hindered by the geo-geography of the land: the many forests and marshes favored defense. The battle of Saulė in Lithuania in 1236 is a good example. During that summer, a new force of Crusaders arrived in Riga from Lubeck via Visby and demanded to fight the pagans. Reluctantly, Master Volquin raised a force of natives and Swordbrothers to lead them in plundering Samogitia. Returning from the raid, they were trapped in a swamp by Lithuanians and even the bravest armored knights were, according to the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, "cut down like women."<sup>8</sup> Saulė, however, was an exception since the Order had already changed tactics to suit the environment. From 1211 onwards, the Order planned winter campaigns because frozen swamps and waters provided easy access for cavalry to the enemy's territory, and it was difficult for the natives to hide in forests. The powerful Oeselians, living on the island of the same name, could only be conquered in the winter when the Baltic Sea froze.

An example of a typical native fort is Leole situated on a hilltop in Saccalia. Excavation has shown that this fort was approximately 500 square meters in area and enclosed by an earthwork wall. A 2.5 meter high wall of horizontally laid evergreen logs provided support against the inner and outer sides of the earthwork. Placed on top of this palisade were towers or protected wooden platforms for the defenders to stand. Another type of fort was built in Western Estonia where the land was low. There the walls were constructed out of slabs of limestone and could have reached a height of nine meters and enclosed an area as large as two hectares.<sup>9</sup> Most forts were surrounded by a ditch or a moat.

In 1186 the first stone forts in Livonia were built at Uexkull and Holm by stonemasons from Gothland. The concept was alien to neighboring natives who, "hearing of the building made of stones, and not knowing that the stones were held together with cement, came with large ship's ropes, foolishly believing they could pull the fort in the Duna."<sup>10</sup> Throughout the rest of the Chronicle, the Order was not able to erect any stone forts since they lacked resources and time; therefore, they only improved sites of former native forts.

There were four ways to conquer an enemy within the defensive fortifications: assault over the ramparts; assault through a breach in the wall caused by bombardment, sapping, or fire; assault under the walls by mining; or a blockade to reduce the garrison by starvation. First the besiegers would fill in parts of the moat or ditch around the fort with wood to allow access to the palisades. Men would then try to scale the walls using ladders, but this was usually unsuccessful. What did work, however, was building a large wooden tower on wheels and rolling it across the moat against the wall. The tower would at least equal the height of the palisade so that crossbowmen could shoot down into the fort, and a drawbridge could be lowered so warriors massed inside could charge over the rampart. At the bottom of the tower, or under their own separate protective structure, would be sappers. Henry describes their work: "The Germans were digging day and night at the ramparts. They did not rest until the rampart was cut in two, until it was expected that the whole fortification would tumble to the ground."[11](#)

The Crusaders had a major advantage in their use of large projectile throwing machines. The catapult operated on the principle of torsion, i.e. twisting ropes and flung stones in a low trajectory. The trebuchet was operated by counterbalance and had a sling that threw stones in a high trajectory. Ballistas were magnified crossbows that fired four meter iron-tipped shafts or could also shoot rocks. The ballista was very accurate since it had a flat trajectory, and it was used by both attacker and defender as an anti-personnel weapon.

In every siege an attempt was made to set the enemy's palisade on fire. However, only once throughout the Chronicle did fire succeed in forcing surrender. When besieging a fortress, the Crusaders did not slaughter the inhabitants if they wished to surrender and accept baptism. To guarantee that the pagans would honor the deal, the Crusaders "demanded the sons of the better people as hostages."[12](#)

Though their thirteenth century military technology was at the same level as that of the Eastern Baltic natives, the Russians had superior political organization. The Russian people were organized into a number of principalities and were led into battle by their princes. The principalities of Novgorod, Pskov, and Polotsk, had an influence on events in the Eastern Baltic, but their goal was limited to gaining tribute. By Russow's time, a united Russia had the more ambitious aim of acquiring commercial ports on the Baltic Sea. But, between Henry's and Russow's times Russia was pre-occupied with the Mongols and their successor states; therefore Russian armies were geared towards steppe warfare. Cavalry dominated the steppes since mobility was the most important requirement. The technical and tactical developments of fifteenth and sixteenth century Western Europe were not of much consequence to the Muscovites — heavy armour, field artillery, or squares of pikemen would be useless on the great Eurasian plain.[13](#) Bows and sabres were still the most vital weapons, with cannons and firearms only being used during sieges.

Guns were first employed in Livonia in 1382.[14](#) In the fifteenth century, they were put to regular use. In medieval armies cavalry was the dominant and decisive element, but by the sixteenth century the outcome of a battle depended more on the strength and discipline of the infantry. Compact, massed squares of infantry armed with long four to six meter pikes were able to shatter cavalry charges and take offensive action themselves. Pikemen, however, were vulnerable to arquebus or musket fire, but arquebusiers were defenseless against cavalry after they had fired the single shot that they usually had time for before the horsemen reached them. Therefore, the dominant tactic of the sixteenth century became the mutual dependence of pike and arquebus,

The arquebus utilized the matchlock firing mechanism which consisted of a trigger underneath the stock that controlled the movement of a cock clasp a wick that was lowered against the priming pan to ignite the charge propelling a twenty-five gram lead ball out of the barrel. Mounted pistoleers used an expensive wheelock mechanism where the powder was ignited by sparks created by a piece of pyrites that came in contact with the serrated edge of a wheel that spun when the trigger was pressed.

The new importance of lower class footsoldiers and the expense of artillery and mercenaries impinged on the individual noble's independence and importance and added to the power of the emerging sovereign states by giving them a monopoly over warfare. In the mid-sixteenth century, the rulers of the three main competitors for Livonia all consolidated the power of the state. Ivan IV of Muscovy took the title of Tsar, his "oprichniki" liquidated potential opponents to his central authority, and he standardized regulations for military service and established the first permanent regiments known as the "streltsy" or arquebusiers. In 1569, the King of Poland, Sigismund Augustus, managed to formally unite Lithuania and Poland into a single state. King Gustav Wasa, the "builder of the Swedish state," established a Treasury, created a Swedish navy, and founded the first permanent military service.

The fundamental relationship between an attacking and defending force was not altered in three and a half centuries. At the first sign of danger, defenders would withdraw into forts, and the invaders would pillage the countryside and lay siege. Pitched battles were still avoided. The advantage that cannons gave the besiegers was offset by the corresponding strengthening of fortifications. Russow comments on Reval's defenses: "The town with earthworks, screening walls, high round towers, double trenches or moats almost all around and in some places double earthworks was so protected that no town wall could be hit by artillery . . . "[15](#)

According to Russow the largest type of cannon used was the "cartouwen" which fired fifty-two pound iron balls and likely had a caliber of eight inches, weighed eight thousand pounds, and required at least twenty horses or oxen to transport it. A wide assortment of cannons that fired five to twenty-five pound iron balls was in general use. Mortars, guns that lobbed

missiles in a high trajectory, but a short distance, were also- common. Some fired stone shots as heavy as two hundred and twenty-five pounds while others fired incendiary balls. Fire was especially dangerous for the besieged, and Russow details the precautions taken, such as covering roofs with earth and slabs of limestone. The most powerful and awe-inspiring ordinance seen in the Livonian Wars was the twenty-four Swedish "double" and "half cartouwen" that pulverized the five and a half meter walls of Narva in two days in 1581.[16](#)

During the fourteenth century, stronger plate armor had superseded mail, but by the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was evident that no armor was strong enough to protect the wearer from the fire of the arquebus. Armor during the Livonian Wars was in a period of transition:

although its usefulness was declining, it was not discarded. Those who wore plate armor now only wore half armor that protected the upper part of the body down to the thigh. Leather boots protected the legs to above the knees. Those who could not afford full armor, or those who thought flexibility and comfort more important, wore varieties of leather or fabric coats that encased hundreds of small steel plates. The most popular types of helmets were the close helmet and the open style burgonet and morion, a common feature being a keel-like crest that went across the top of the skull.[17](#)

According to Henry, "an extremely large" native army in 1217 consisted of six thousand men. A christian army typically included three thousand German infantry and knights and equal numbers of Livs and Letts. The latter two groups fought on foot to the left and right of the heavily armored German knights who held the center. Native losses often numbered over a thousand men, mainly as a result of undisciplined retreats that usually became routs. The losses of the German knights were so low that Henry names and praises each individual when he is killed. In the sixteenth century, the Westerners continued to fight in the same numerical scale, but the size of the Russian forces increased drastically: in 1577, they besieged Reval with fifty thousand men. Casualties were also much greater on both sides during the Livonian Wars.

Plundering, blood lusting, and the taking of slaves remained constants. Russow writes how one day during the siege of Reval in 1571, the Russians sent home over two thousand large sleighs packed with booty. When the Swedes captured Narva in 1581, thousands of people were murdered "according to custom", as stated by Pontus de la Gardie, the Swedish commander.[18](#) The Tartar arm of the Russian forces specifically tried to capture inhabitants of Livonia to take home and sell as slaves.

The aims of warfare and the goals of the individual participants changed, though religious motives were present in both time periods, with Protestantism adding a new dimension to the latter. Sixteenth century soldiers fought for the purposes of the emerging early modern state, which were basically to control the East-West trade by occupying Livonia or to prevent a rival from doing so. Therefore, the combatant's connection to his side's cause was more remote than that of a native or a Crusader. Warfare was also more impersonal in terms of the relations between opponents on the battlefield: a thirteenth century warrior tried to strike a specific man standing a meter away; a sixteenth century soldier used gunpowder to propel a small lead ball into a mass of men at a distance of fifty meters.

The sixteenth century was one of the periods in history .when large numbers of mercenaries were employed. Need-less to say, soldiers whose basic motive was money were not always reliable. When their pay was not forthcoming, the German mercenaries garrisoning Fellin in 1560 made a deal with the Russians besiegers to deliver the castle, but first they robbed the inhabitants of their valuables. By Russow's time, the descendants of the German Crusaders had become virtually the only native warriors; the natives' role was to support the war with supplies and taxes.

Characteristics of warfare in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries can be compared using the paradigm of military historian J.M. Brereton who states that the history of war is an alternation between the primacy of shock action and missile ascendancy.[19](#) The cavalry charge was a winning tactic of the Crusaders, and their superior armor neutralized any missiles thrown or shot through the air at them. On the other hand, during the Livonian Wars armor could no longer shield anyone from the lethal effects of gunpowder, and cavalry charges were frustrated by arquebusiers protected by pikemen. Therefore, cavalymen also took up firearms and became simply mounted pistoleers. Their tactic was to trot up to the enemy, rank by rank, discharge their pistols and then retire to reload behind the protection of their own arquebusiers and pikemen.

Winter continued to be the season favored by invaders, one reason being the ease of transporting artillery by sled. The most noticeable feature of warfare in Livonia that remained constant, however, was the relative absence of great field battles and the corresponding importance of fortresses and siege warfare.

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1 Paul Johansen, "Kronist Balthasar Russowi paritolu ja mijoo." in *Tulimuld*. No. 4, 1964. pp. 252-260; William Urban, "The Nationality of Balthasar Russow." in *Journal of Baltic Studies*. No.2, V.12. pp. 160-172.

2 Henry of Livonia, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. Translated by James Brundage. (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961). p. 179.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

5 Archeological evidence in Jaanits, L, Laul, S., Lougas, V., and E. Tonisson. *Eesti esiajalugu*. (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1982).

6 Henry of Livonia, p. 110.

7 For these crusades, see Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades: the Baltic and the Catholic Frontier 1100-1525*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1980) and William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975).

8 *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*. Translated by J. Smith and W. Urban. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). p. 27.

9 Jaanits, p. 325.

10 Henry of Livonia, p. 26.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

13 Thomas Esper, "Military Self-Sufficiency and Weapons Technology in Muscovite Russia." in *Slavic Review*. No. 2, V. 28. p. 192

14 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

15 Balthasar Russow, *Livimaa Kroonika*. Translated by D. and H. Stock. (Stockholm: Vaba Eesti, 1967). p. 263. J. Smith's and W. Urban's first English translation has just been published this year (1988).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

17 Ewart Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour*. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1980). p. 194.

18 Ingvar Andersson, *A History of Sweden*. Translated by Carolyn Hannay. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1956). p. 146.

