

THE NARRATION OF WOMAN AS OCCUPIED TERRITORY IN BIRUTĖ BALTRUŠAITYTĖS "UNDER THE SOUTHWESTERN SKY"¹

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This paper² seeks to examine the meanings produced by the interplay of the discursive practices of gender and national identity in Birutė Baltrušaitytė's *Under the Southwestern Sky*, a collection of short stories published in 1981 in Soviet Lithuania. By "nation" I mean its linguistic, social, and political connotations - I see "nation" functioning within these texts as both the terrain of language and relations of in-tersubjectivity; as the struggle for land, territory, and autonomy;³ and as an entity comprised of the bodies of its citizens.

"National identity" then also refers to shared language and social interaction, common territory, and citizenship. "Gender" and "gender identity" can similarly be seen as socially and politically determining and determined by how the subject imagines his or her physical as well as social place in his or her community.

The short stories of *Under the Southwestern Sky* are tied together by their location within the borderlands between Lithuania and what was East Prussia. This region has been a meeting-place of Lithuanians, Prussians, Poles, Masurians, Germans, Russians and others for centuries.⁴ Most of the stories take place during German annexation of the Klaipėda (Memel) region in 1939 - on both the Lithuanian and German sides of the border. The opening story of the collection, however, is situated in the seventeenth century, witnessing the final days of the last speaker of Old Prussian as he reconciles himself to the fact that his own physical death also means the end of the Prussian worldview and way of life as it can only be expressed in his language. Thus the specter of Prussian as a soon-to-be extinct culture and language - that of the East Prussians⁵ - hovers over the stories suggesting what may happen to the Lithuanians as well.

The text was published during Soviet occupation - and hence could not openly challenge the occupation. To avoid censorship, authors developed an Aesopian language to discuss unacceptable topics. Examples of such Aesopian codes were the criticism of the Soviet occupation by reference to officially sanctioned criticisms of Nazi German occupation or Christianization by the Teutonic Knights. Another example of this kind of encoded speech is the allusion to Siberian deportations as "long journeys" or the mention of having spent time "up North".⁶

Until World War II, the ethnic composition of the regions of Klaipėda (Memel) and Königsberg was nearly half German and half Lithuanian.⁷ Historically the territories were the site of political, religious, and cultural power struggles between the Lithuanians and the Germans living there. For example in the nineteenth century, vigorous policies of Germanization had promoted mixed marriages and curtailed Lithuanian language instruction in the schools. In the twentieth century most businesses and the largest tracts of land were German-owned; and the school system was based on the German model. After the Lithuanian insurrection of 1923, Lithuanians began founding cultural, economic and political organizations, and promoting more cooperation with the Lithuanians of Lithuania Major. After the German annexation of the Memel lands, many Lithuanians fled to Lithuania Major. Those remaining who participated in pro-Lithuanian activities were harassed, arrested and sent to concentration camps. Baltrušaitytė's texts depict this moment in Lithuanian-German relations in the Klaipėda territories.

The problem of ethnic identity within an ethnically mixed region is of great importance to Birutė Baltrušaitytė. The fact that the author grew up in the Klaipėda region of Lithuania, then, comes as no surprise, for all her works of fiction and poetry are situated there. A careful reading of *Under the Southwestern Sky*, however, reveals that there is more at work here than ethnic strife: throughout the text, issues of gender and ties of family and tradition complicate the oppositions of Us and Them, Lithuanians and Germans. The text significantly questions how women's rights and responsibilities change with

occupation when the nation is at risk of losing its identity. While at the same time stressing the importance of national survival, Baltrušaitytė seems to be questioning the validity of privileging the rights of the nation over those of half its population. Such privileging, unfortunately, is quite prevalent in Lithuanian nationalist discourse.⁸

The narrative of *Under the Southwestern Sky* can in many ways be seen as territorializing the female body as a metonym for the nation. Images of women in the stories are often associated with images of the Lithuanian territory. In this respect, the Germans' struggle to control and the Lithuanians' attempts to resist are played out over the bodies of the women in the narrative: the female characters' bodies are described as being kicked back and forth between Germany and Russia; they are compared to soft, pliant surfaces over which the citizens of Germany will march, consummating invasion and seizure:

Greitai eis per ją žmonės, visa Vokietija pakils anapus ir dar toliau ir eis per jos minkštą pilvą, per krūtinę ir kaklą. Juk toks gerasėjimas, nenuspardysi blizgančiu batų galų į grindinį (PPD51).

Soon the townsfolk will walk across her, all of Germany over there - and beyond - will rise up and walk over her soft stomach, over her chest and neck. A pleasant walk, no cobblestones to break the tips of your shiny shoes (Kelertas 54).

The occupation is indeed inscribed physically upon the protagonist Marta's body; but what is even more dangerous is that it is also reproduced within her body, resulting in a "foreign" entity, as the narrator indicates:

O žodžiai irgi dvasia. Jie gali tapti kūnu. Tasai kūnas gimdys, ir gimdys svetimą dvasią... Viešpatie, atleisk, gal ji nežino, ką daro (PPD49).

Words are also spirit. They can become flesh. The flesh will give birth, and to a foreign spirit... God, forgive her, perhaps she doesn't know what she's doing (Kelertas 53).

Women because of their ability to bear children are held responsible for reproducing the nation. They are the "medium" by which new citizens are to be born and socialized, and hence the population of the nation assured.

By depicting women as occupiable territory, the narrative raises the issue of women's agency within the threatened nation. Women - the territory - need to be protected or controlled against enemy invasion, for as the narrator says above "*perhaps she doesn't know what she's doing*" (Kelertas 53, my emphasis). Women's agency, in this sense, resists categorization: either it is non-existent because women are creatures of instinct, with no knowledge of or control over their dangerous actions; or on the other hand, they know very well what they're doing, and are nevertheless willing to compromise the nation's security for their own pleasure or benefit; in other words, they are traitors⁹:

Hansai, tik pažiūrėk, graži ta lietuvninke. Panorėsi, ji bus tikra vokietė. Moterys kaip katės - pirmos paklusta valdžiai (PPD 50).

Just look, Hans, she's pretty, that Lithuanian. If you want, she can become a real German. Women are like cats - they're the first to kneel to whomever is in power (Kelertas 53).

These traitors are depicted as controlled by their emotions and desires, rather than in control themselves. Or even worse, they are seen as eminently inscribable, with no integrity or identity of their own; they are only interested in achieving their self-serving ends. It is for this reason that women must be watched.

If one pursues the metonymy of women as nation, however, the proper role for the Motherland is put into question. If the proper woman is controlled (by others) and not controlling (of her own needs), who then is the proper Motherland? Is her proper role to obey, to be controlled and occupied? The narrative conspicuously avoids an easy answer to this question - there are no mothers in the text!

The metonymy of woman and nation is also disturbed by the power relations between the German occupier and Lithuanian occupied. How do Lithuanian women, traditionally objects to be bartered (married off in exchange for land) fare when the land now belongs to the occupiers? And considering their traditionally subservient relationship to their husbands and fathers¹⁰, to whom do they owe allegiance when their beloved is German and their father is Lithuanian, or when their father's stubborn behavior breaks the law?

The text does not provide a simple one-to-one correspondence between occupier as male and German, and occupied as female and Lithuanian. Relationships between fathers and daughters, between members of the same community are much more complicated. Adding to the complexities are class issues, traditions, as well as the existence of ethnic minorities, such as the Gypsy Aleksas in the story "Čigonas bėga kiek įkabindamas" (Gypsy Running With All His Might); and the "hybrid" ethnic identity of the so-called "lietuvninkai," or, Prussian Lithuanians, those Lithuanians who live in the Klaipėda region having assimilated to the German culture to some degree.

The narrative's exploration of spaces and places within the narrative reveals just how difficult it is to "place" identity. "This bank" and "that bank" of the River Nemunas, the concepts of Lithuanian-ness and German-ness, occupier and occupied, and private/domestic and public/social interact with the traditional distinctions between the female and the male roles in traditional society in a continual shifting and even overlapping as traditional strictures are transgressed by Lithuanian women who act on their desires: for example, in Marta's ill-fated love for a German man in the stories "Rankos ant iškrakmolytos prijuostės" (Hands on Starched Apron) and "Prie šito lango" (By this Window). "Mėsininkas" (The Butcher) offers another example of transgression of boundaries: this time by the town butcher, who is responsible for the slaughter

of the bodies of his nation, as he sells the flesh of his countrymen and women as quality meats to the Germans and Lithuanians alike in his town.

Spaces

When one examines the structuring of spaces within the narrative, one is immediately struck by the characters' expectations for a rigid distinction between the private and the public; and correspondingly between the interior - the safe, secure spaces of familiarity and familiarity - and the exterior - the dangerous spaces of the unknown, the foreign (perhaps not too surprising during wartime). Interior spaces, are associated with traditions, social expectations and obligations, and are typically gendered as feminine; they are the domestic domain. The exterior spaces envelop the wide open spaces of unexplored territories and peoples, as well as the even more dangerous liminal places of border or marketplace where different cultures mingle (indeed a microcosm for this region in general), and are gendered as masculine. These spaces are not only to be understood as physical locations; they are also present as intimate (interior) and formal (exterior) interactions. War has disrupted this interior-exterior distinction in "Hands on Starched Apron" and "By This Window".

Both short stories are situated on the East Prussian side of the River Nemunas border and explore the intrusion of the exterior into the inner sanctum of home and familiar traditions and language, threatening both linguistic and political notions of nation. The Nemunas itself appears in several of the stories as the space "in between." Because this space dissolves all differences, it is alternatively seen as dangerous [for example to Austomas, who worries about the extinction of his people: "Upėje dingsta pėdsakai, todėl upė gali apgauti" (11) (All traces vanish in the river; that is why the river can deceive you)]; but it also can be seen as a solution to ethnic discord as in the example of the Lithuanian Izabelė's forbidden love for the Gypsy Aleksas. When their attempt to escape her arranged marriage to a wealthy landowner fails, the two lovers drown themselves in the Nemunas, where their ethnic differences are no longer relevant:

Tokie, kaip į žemę atėjo, iššoka iš vežimo, balta ranka ant rudo kūno, o rudoji ant balto, ir juodas Nemunas priima: jam vis tiek, kokia tavo tauta ir kokia tavo kūno spalva (PPD 46).

They jump out of the wagon, the same way they came into the world, white arm on brown body, brown arm on white body, and the black Nemunas accepts them: it doesn't care what race or color you are (Kelertas 51).

The commercial space of the marketplace, a location for the mingling of customers and dealers of all classes and nationalities, is the site of potential danger: Marta, selling her father's baked goods, is told by one of her customers that the market is no place for a woman alone. This comment is meant to put Marta back in her place - back inside, at home minding her domestic responsibilities, and not outside in the commercial (masculine) sphere of money-making.

Wild grasses and wheat grow out from in between the cobblestones of the market, suggesting the wild, untamable nature of culture that forces its way to the surface (63). Yet it is not Marta, but her father, Jonas Dalgis, figure of familial authority, who perishes in this dangerous location - he is assaulted, and knocked to the ground by a German youth:

- Kas jūs esate? - šauna tasai.

- Jonas... Johann Dal... miktėli tėvas. -

Ateivio akys be jokios gėdos. Jis kelia ranką, kažkuo ilgu ir tampriu staiga rėžia seniui per švariai nuskustą žandą.- Juk tu lietuvis! - rėkia jis. - Eine litauische... - Schweine ... Ja, ja, -bruzda aplinkui sustojusi miestelėnų minia. Teisybė, ne visi šaukia, kitų burnos užkimštos turgaus gėrybėmis (PPD 50-1).

'Who are you?' retorts [the youth].

'Jonas... Jonas Dali...' Father stumbles. The intruder's eyes betray no shame. He's raising his arm. Suddenly he strikes the old man across his clean-shaven cheek with a long rubbery object. 'You're a Lithuanian!' he shouts. 'Ein litauisches... Schwein'...'Ja, ja,' the crowd of townsfolk that has gathered around them is getting agitated. True, not everyone is shouting, some mouths are too stuffed with goodies from the market (Kelertas 54).

The reason for this attack? Dalgis has hung up a Lithuanian sign on his shop and openly speaks the Lithuanian language which has been forbidden. Others speak the language, but not so boldly - one of Marta's customers hides under the protection of a straw hat in order to tell Marta (in Lithuanian) that some of their countrymen and women were stoned to death as they left their church. The hiding of his face under a hat betrays the man's suspicion of surveillance - one is always aware of being observed (likely a reference to the Soviet panopticon as well) by the authorities as well as other townsfolk. These townsfolk, incidentally, are not particularly sympathetically portrayed - the only reason they do not shout ethnic epithets to Dalgis is because their mouths are too full of food!

The market scene describes an inversion or upheaval of social hierarchies as Jonas Dalgis, the father of Marta and respected businessman, is thrown into a pile of horse manure by a German youth in front of his daughter and the rest of the town. This upheaval explores the crisis of authority created by occupation. Should Marta obey the Law of (her) Father or the Law of the (Deutsch)Land? In fact the situation is even more complex because, to her father's disapproval, Marta is in love with Hans, a German soldier.

Inside her home the evening after her father's attack, there is no relief from the danger. Marta feels partly responsible for her father's attack (it is implied that Hans may have caused the incident to get Marta's disapproving father out of the way). Her unease is externalized in her room's inhabitation by eerie figures - a cold slippery Bible that feels like a fish, a pretzel bun left over from that afternoon, most likely the bun that her father caressed before his fall, her father's clothes still hanging in the closet. But in the dangerous outside, it's even worse: the street resembles a long black coffin extending into the distance. A heavy knock breaks the silence and Hans enters, holding a horsewhip. He asks for some coffee, initiating a domestic ritual of hospitality, but the whip's presence speaks otherwise: it reminds the reader of the events of the day, and especially of Hans's position as master/occupier over Marta and her countrymen and women. He rapes Marta.

The violation of the rape is intensified by Marta's taking the blame for it. She insists on her "two sins" - towards her father and her nation, acknowledging that she was aware that her association with Hans was risky and even wrong. Nevertheless, afterwards Marta clings to Hans and begs him to remain with her. She reminds him of the house they had both dreamed of building together:

Bet, mein Hans, sako ji meiliai, ...Juk čia Hansas, Hansas! Atmena, kaip abu irstėsi laivėliu po ežerą ir Hansas balsiai svajojo apie naujus, čerpėmis dengtus namus, kur juodu gyvensią (PPD 65).

But, mein Hans, she says tenderly ...This is Hans, Hans! She remembers the two of them paddling around the lake, and Hans dreaming out loud about the new red-tiled house they would live in...(Kelertas 57).

The rape of Marta by Hans can be read as a reference to the "rape" of Lithuania by Germany (and later by the Soviet Union) of the Lithuanian territory, enticed with promises of peaceful co-existence and respect for her autonomy. As a woman trained in the properly obedient attitude towards men in her society, Marta's clinging to Hans is not entirely unexpected. On the other hand, just as Hans's promises may have represented a more adult, perhaps less provincial life for Marta, Germany too held a promise of liberation from Russian occupation for Lithuania.

The two stories can be read with respect to linguistic concepts of the nation, as well as to political notions. It is not insignificant that Jonas Dalgis is punished for speaking his language. Language is dangerous because it is a powerful vehicle for solidarity. We mustn't forget that Dalgis and the other Lithuanians in this town are twice removed from the Lithuanian territory - they live on the East Prussian side of the Nemunas River, and their own land is occupied by Nazi Germany. Thus for Dalgis and the other ethnic Lithuanians of this town, participation in the national discourse is made possible primarily by speaking the Lithuanian language. The occupier's prohibition against speaking the language makes speaking it all the more vital, as the example of Old Prussian illustrated in the story "Austomas". Marta, on the other hand, is appalled by her father's open declaration of Lithuanian-ness. The reader might surmise that her reaction is due to concern for her father's (and her own) safety, but the text provides clues that this is not entirely so: on the day of her father's attack, at the sight of Hans, Marta "feverishly" bursts out "*Mein Hans!*" in German without realizing it. Her reaction to Hans can thus be characterized as provoked by causes outside herself - she is consumed by fever, or perhaps in other words, her body is under the control of a foreign entity.

While Marta's emotional state is depicted as transgressive of familial, national and moral obligations, it is also seen as out of control, beyond reasonable expectations). She, however, is in control to the extent that she is acting on her desires, despite the danger involved. And the danger originates in her transgression of acceptable behavior as a woman, as a daughter, and as a Lithuanian.

Places

The descriptions of the butcher Rupšas's shop and home in the story *The Butcher* similarly explore the inside/outside opposition, with the interior depicted as a place of refuge. There images of familiarity, control, and order predominate: the lamp that lights the shop once belonged to his father. The butcher's spotless chopping block and scales are only outdone by the cleanliness of the meat itself. Rupšas's clothing, despite his profession, is white and well-pressed. The order that reigns in the butcher's shop is contrasted to the fact that next door are the marketplace (recalling the course of events in the previous stories) and the local beer hall in which chaos rules: red-faced men with disheveled grey hair wave their arms wildly and passionately, caught up in the frenzy of drunkenness (this scene mirrors a painting of the Battle of Grunwald¹¹ hanging on the beer hall wall).

But war creates turmoil in Rupšas's carefully controlled environment. He is forced into an agreement with the devil -so to speak, the Germans - to become the dealer of meats of obscure origin; he is told of his responsibility to feed his people who will be working for the occupiers:

Greit šiam krašte neliks kiaulių, jaučių nei arklių, o prekyba kaip? Prekyba turės būti. Taigi. Aš siūlau geriausią prekę. Jos vis daugės ir daugės. Ilgam užteks, sakau tau... Jūsiškiai turi dirbti mums, o kas maitins? Tu, pons mėsininke! (PPD 80).

Soon there will be no more pigs, no more bulls or horses in these parts, and what will happen to business? Business must continue. So I am offering you the finest product. There will be more and more of it. It will last for a long time, I tell you... Your people will work for us, but who will feed them?

All the other shops in town eventually close due to scarcity of goods, but Rupšas's business thrives. Eventually the townspeople start to wonder, and Rupšas begins to feel pangs of conscience over the pact. He begins to worry about his safety - he inspects his locks, sealing himself inside. He decides that his only possibility for a life from here on in is to marry - he "buys" himself a bride; his only requirement that she be young and in possession of all her teeth. He expects his bride to provide him with relief and forgetfulness. (Woman as medium, once again!). Danger nevertheless breaks into his sanctuary one day in the figures of several vengeful visitors, who carry piles of meat to Rupšas's feet, chanting "man, woman, child, man, woman, child". They throw Rupšas's pregnant wife onto the pile, telling him to sell her as well. The danger from outside has been brought inside.

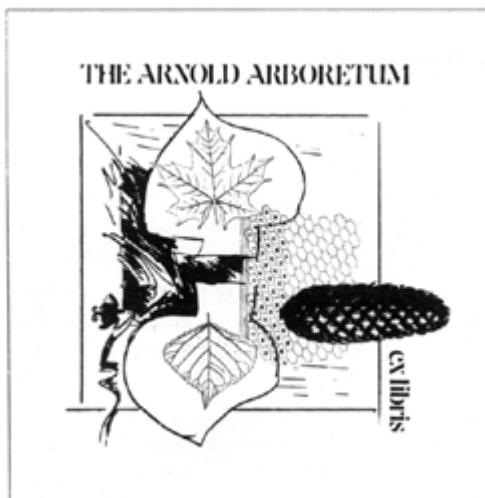
The Germans demanded that Rupšas feed his people. Oddly, the task of nourishing normally has feminine implications: a mother is normally very personally involved in the sustenance of each of her children. Here, because of the chaos of war, the children of the nation have become faceless pieces of meat, awaiting consumption by enemies and countrymen alike; the care-giving mother figure is supplanted by the figure of the professional and efficient butcher, recycling the bodies of his fellow citizens in much the same manner that the Nazis wove clothing from the Jews they killed in concentration camps. What are the implications of a "nation" defined as the bodies of its citizens if those bodies are being consumed by their own? Who then is responsible for the carnage? The narrative seems to be pinning the blame on the nation itself, on Rupšas for making the pact, and his fellow citizens for unquestioningly participating in the meal. The townsfolk who are too busy chewing to take part in the attack on their neighbor Dalgis, are similarly implicated.

Marta's predicament seems very similar in this context. As the physical manifestation of the national territory, Marta, is no doubt brutally violated by the German "invasion", but her clinging to Hans after the rape and her begging him to make good on his earlier promises of domestic bliss imply a docile acceptance one's destiny. Nevertheless the author does show compassion for figures who have made the wrong choice and suffered greatly as a consequence, such as the father in "...And His Very Own Home..." who takes too long to choose whether or not to shelter a runaway prisoner from an unnamed camp. He is worried about jeopardizing the safety of his daughters yet he does want to help the prisoner. His indecision ends up costing him his own life as well as that of the prisoner: by the time he finally makes his decision, the guards and their dogs have entered his yard. He is caught red-handed.

Us and Them

The identification of woman as metonym for the nation reveals several layers of complicated questions and problems which, I have attempted to argue, are simultaneously proposed and problematized by the narrative in *Under the Southwestern Sky*. Identity - either national or gender - is not structured by one simple Us and Them opposition. Identifications and loyalties to one group are unavoidably complicated by constellations of identifications and loyalties that contradict and supplant one another as the subject (and the nation) confronts various personal, social, and historical processes and events.

The narrator's position in the text is similarly complicated. At times, ruthless, she sides with the "enemy" as she whispers suggestions into the ear of Hans, seemingly to tell him that Marta is his for the taking, encouraging him to rape her; or when she cites her narratorial authority to tell Marta's father Dalgis that there is no point in waiting for help - she first needs to describe his attack for her readers. At other times, however, the narrator is compassionate, even empathizing with her victim characters by including herself in the first- and second-person accounts of their fears or sorrows. The narrator's fluidity reinforces the text's slipperiness: together they defy easy classifications of territories and ethnicities, and of obligations and loyalties.



¹ References to the original Lithuanian are from Birutė Baltrušaitytė, *Po pietvakariu dangumi*, Vilnius: Vaga. 1981, henceforth referred to as PPD. My English translation appeared in Violeta Kelertas, Ed., *Come Into My Time: Lithuania in Prose Fiction, 1970-1990*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1992. Henceforth referred to as Kelertas.

² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on women and war entitled "Conquering Women" sponsored by the Department of Germanics at the University of California at Berkeley, March 1997.

³ These definitions of "nation" are found in Ileana Rodriguez *House/Garden/Nation: Latin American Literatures by Women*, Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP. 1994, p. 4; and Sarah A. Radcliffe's article "Gendered Nations: Nostalgia, Development and Territory in Ecuador," *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1996): 5-21, esp. p. 6.

⁴ See Alvydas Nikžentaitis, "In the Borderlands: The Borders of Lithuania and Prussia in the Pre-Nationalistic Period," trans. Aleksandras Frolovas, *Vilnius* (Summer 1998): 147-57. This issue is dedicated to articles about Klaipeda, its regions, and its writers.

⁵ The text refers to the Prussians in this region as 'nutautėja', or those who have lost their sense of nationality or nationhood. The nutautėję Prussians appear throughout the stories in the collection as a tragic example of the fate of small nations, as well as an example of betrayal. The Prussian character Austomas refers disparagingly to Lithuanians who have intentionally changed their identity in exchange for wealth or Status: "Ir gyveno jis, Austomas, netoli lietuvių, kurie vadinosi lietuvninkai, o dar prasčiau - vokiečiai vadintis imdavo" (PPD 14). (And so Austomas lived, close to the Lithuanians, who called themselves "lietuvninkai" (see footnote 6), and even worse - they began to call themselves Germans.)

⁶ For more on Aesopian language see Violeta Kelertas's introduction to Violeta Kelertas, ed., *Come Into My Time: Lithuania in Prose Fiction, 1970-1990*.

⁷ The Lithuanians of the region - Lithuania Minor - have traditionally been called "lietuvninkai" or "Prussian Lithuanians" to differentiate them from the Lithuanians in Lithuania Major. The dialect and customs of the "lietuvninkai" differed from those of the Lithuanians of Lithuania Major.

⁸ For more on this see Artūras Tereškinas, "The Gendering of the Lithuanian Nation in Maironis's (1862-1932) Poetry," *Lituanus*, Summer 1999.

⁹ See Jean Franco on women as traitors to the nation in her book *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. New York: Columbia UP. 1989.

¹⁰ I speak only of fathers and daughters because significantly in Baltrušaitytė's text none of the daughters have mothers.

¹¹ The Battle of Grünwald is significant here, because the 1410 Battle represented a Polish-Lithuanian victory over the Teutonic Knights, halting their advance eastward along the Baltic.