

The Taking of Polack — 1579

AN ELIZABETHAN NEWSHEET

That the taking of the fortress of Polack by Stefan Batory was considered to be a famous victory in its day is evident from the publication of this rare English newsheet in the year of the battle itself — 1579. The interest which this event aroused in England may be explained in part by economic and in part by political factors. In Elizabethan days the growing power of England's fleet in the face of the threat of the Hapsburg Empire caused the merchants in London and the furnishers of the Queen's navy to look to their sources of supply of "all necessaries for their shipping as Masts, ropes, pitch and tar, hemp and flax... from Pruceland, Leueland and Roussyay."¹ Political quarrels with the German Emperor, and constant disputes with the once all-powerful Hanseatic League were having a detrimental effect on England's Baltic trade, and forcing the London merchants to seek new sources of raw material by the northern route to Archangel and Muscovy.² This process was hastened by the uncertainty caused by the outcome of the Livonian Wars.

In 1563 Ivan the Terrible, Tsar of Muscovy, bent on the conquest of new lands to add to his already vast domains, and the opening of a window on the Baltic, invaded the North Eastern lands of his ancient enemy and rival the Grand Duke of Lithuania. He laid siege to and captured the key-fortress of Polack and swept through the rich province of Livonia (which had but recently come under the Grand Ducal crown), thus establishing control over the Dzvina waterway, the great port of Riga and a large stretch of the "Gothic shore." The resulting Russian threat to the Byelorussian territories of the Grand Duchy induced the reluctant magnates to support a plan for political union with the Kingdom of Poland which was carried into effect at Lublin in 1569. The brutality of this assault filled the rest of Europe with a sentiment of horror and revulsion, and it is worth quoting a contemporary German newsheet illustrating the intensity of the general indignation:

"The Army of the Muscovite some weeks ago invaded the territory of the Pole, and after six brave assaults, carried the city of Polotzki or Pleski by storm (a town of Lithuania at a distance of seventeen miles from the deserts), the which they plundered and putting fire to it, levelled to the ground; and

¹) Extract from a letter of Thomas North, Mariner, to Walsingham. Cf. A. Butler: *Calendar of State Papers — FS* — Jan. 1581 to Apr. 1582." London 1907, p. 647.

²) The English Muscovy Company, was particularly active in developing alternative trade routes to obtain these essential raw materials.

from that place they ordered twenty thousand people, first to have their arms and legs chopped off, and then to be strangled, a frightful spectacle to behold. No words can express the outrages they committed upon matrons, maidens and children; sixty thousand and more people from that neighbourhood were led into Muscovia; matrons and maidens were stripped naked and (when they were naked and without garment) they were led chained into captivity. Amongst those that were carried off was likewise the Wayvoda of the Lithuanian Milice, otherwise the leader of their army with his wife, whose life the enemy had spared... May the most good and most great God preserve us from such a furious and cruel enemy, and instill the right wisdom into the Princes of the Holy Roman Empire who have the Government in their hands, and may he instill into the whole of Europe such counsels as be most proper to revenge the enormity of this crime and drive away those pests."³

Continuous wars against the Germans prevented the rulers of the new Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from recovering the lost provinces, but the accession to the Royal and Grand Ducal throne of the energetic and soldierly Hungarian candidate Stefan Batory opened the way to a more vigorous Eastern policy.

On the 3rd of February 1579 Stefan Batory left Warsaw for Grodno to confer with the nobility of the Grand Duchy. He then proceeded to the Capital, Vilna, where he remained from the 2nd of March to the 3rd June together with the Grand Hetman of Lithuania, Prince Mikola Radziwiłł called "the Black." Marshalling his forces he then stormed the castle of Kerepet, and advanced eastward to Svier where he pitched camp.⁴ His military advisers agreed that the recapture of the fortress of Polack should mark the first stage of the campaign.

The Royal Army was composed of a heterogenous force of Polish, Hungarian and German infantry and cavalry, numbering a total of some 11.347 and made up as follows:

Cavalry — Veterans of the Royal Guard	1934
New recruits	3245
Hungarians	1238
Germans	100
	6517
Infantry — Poles	1379
Hungarians	1995
Germans	1456
	4830

The Grand Ducal Army, composed principally of Byelorussians and some Samogitian Letts, numbered a total of some 10.000 of whom

³) Memorabilis et perinde stupenda de crudeli Moscovitarum expeditione narratio e Germanico in Latinum conversa, Douai 1563, trans. J. C. H., London 1874, pp. 17-20.

⁴) Svier was a town some 50 miles to the east of Vilna.

some 4125 were placed at the disposal of the Sovereign, and the remainder dispatched to hold the frontier fortresses.

In addition to this united force of some 15,000 men, Batory was able to muster some 28 cannon, as well as a number of waggons and other vehicles for transport.⁵

The Russian forces defending the fortress of Polack included the famous Strelcy or Archers regiment who were to form the backbone of the Muscovite resistance. They were captained by courageous leaders such as Peter Volhynski, Vassili Telatievski and Dmitry Shcherbaty, and filled with dread at the thought of their fate at the hands of their Tsar, should they fail in their task to hold the fortress. That they were very numerous is made plain by the fact that the Castle of Polack alone was defended by some 6,000 men.

To allay the fears of the civilian population in the theatre of war, Batory caused to be spread abroad his personal assurance that they would come to no harm: "I draw my sword against the Tsar of Muscovy and not against the peaceful inhabitants of this land: I shall spare them, and shall at all times treat them mercifully. For I love valour as much as I detest barbarity, and in the pursuit of victory I shall avoid destruction and a useless shedding of blood."⁶ His mild words were of little avail. With those of the inhabitants of Polack who wished to submit to Batory the Archbishop Cyprian, mindful perhaps of the previous treatment of the city by Ivan, was obliged to remonstrate: "We fear not the wrath of Batory, we fear that of the Tsar!"⁷

On the 23rd June the King and Grand Duke stormed the castle of Koziany (Cossianum) and on the 31st he took the redoubt of Krasne. The fortress of Sitno fell on the 4th of August, and on the 11th he laid siege to the city of Polack, dividing his forces into three camps on the southern bank of the Dzvina river. On the right wing he deployed his Hungarian forces, and on the left wing the Poles and Germans. The broad central front was held by the Byelorussians.⁸ There began then the bombardment of the city and castle which is related in the Elizabethan newsheet.

After the final assault had been successfully launched, the last defenders who had taken refuge in the Cathedral of St. Sophia were dragged out into the presence of Batory who offered to take the Russian voievods into his service. Such was their devotion to their ruler and country, the Russians, although moved by the magnanimity of the Grand Duke Stefan, chose rather to be sent back to their fate in Moscow at the hands of the Tsar, a fate which they knew to be certain death.⁹

⁵) Tadeusz Korzon: *"Dzieje Wojen i Wojskowości w Polsce"*, Vol. II, Kraków 1912, p. 35.

⁶) E. Raczyński: *"Gabinet Medalów Polskich"*, Tom I, Wrocław 1838, p. 213.

⁷) Ibid.

⁸) A. Sapunov: *"Vitebskaya Starina"*, Vol. I, Vitebsk 1883, carta in fine.

⁹) E. Raczynski, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

Batory continued his victorious campaign, recovering the province of Livonia and laying siege to the Russian fortress of Pskov. Unable to match the brilliant advance of Stefan through his lands, Ivan the Terrible was compelled to seek for peace and to abandon all his Lithuanian conquests.

A TRUE REPORTE OF THE TAKING OF THE GREATE TOWNE
AND CASTELL OF POLOTZKO BY THE KING OF POLONIA

with the manner of the Assaults, Batteries, Undermininges,
Skirmishes and Fyreworkes, that were there used from the
11. of August to the 30. of the same month 1579.

A true Reporte of the Taking of the Towne and Castell of *Polotzko*
by the King of Polonia the 30. of August 1579.

THE LAST OF JUNE the King of POLONIA¹⁰ being at a Towne called *Wilde* brake up his Siege and came to *Suerum* to muster there: in whiche place, his Maiestie called together his Lordes and Captaines and men of warre, to know after what order they should prouide for the safegarde and defence of their Countrey and how for to keepe the enimie, which was the *Muscoue* furre from them, and there his Maiestie agreed to beseege the Citie of Polotzko because that Towne lyeth in the border of the great Dukedome of *Litto* and principally of the Towne of *Villo*¹¹ and there lyeth no Fortresse betweene that and the *Wilde*,¹² and if he had not taken the waye to the same Citie, he would haue geuen his enimie waye to haue entered into the Dukedome of Litto, and also to the *Wilde*: and therefore his Maiestie found it needefull to looke to, because he tooke this war in hande, not onelye to recouer that same Towne to the Crowne of Poland againe, as it hath been in times past: but to withstand ye enimiy & to keepe him back. In his Country, the winter is very hard, with verye greate raines, snowes, fogges and continuall frostes: and therefore very perillous to make war, in which the king of Poland hath found verye daingerous in passing from the *Wilde* to the said Cittie of *Polotzko*, by reason of the clammye ground, with the great thawes and raines, and deepe ryuers, with the greate trouble of his caryage, of his great ordinaunce, powder, shot, munition, and all other kinde of artillerye, with the loss of his horses and other beastes for want of sustenance trauailing those barraine wilderness and heigh mountaines:¹³ yet nothing could discourage this mighty prince fro

¹⁰) The expressions "Poland" and "Poles" were used indifferently until comparatively recent times by some authors to describe Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia and Ukraine and their inhabitants, albeit not ethnically Liakh Poles. (Cf. "Les origines Slaves: Pologne et Ruthénie", Paris 1861, p. 97).

¹¹) Possibly Vilejka, though there may be a confusion here with Vilna.

¹²) *Wilde*, a mis-spelling for Vilna.

¹³) There are no "heigh mountaines" between Vilnia and Polack.

taking of this enterprise in hand, although manye of his Noblemen and wise Captaines did show what perill it were for him to passe with so great an Armye, and telling of him the strength of the Towne and the Castell with all other inconueniaunces: yet could hee not be perswaded from his opinion, but rather the more encouraged, gathered his people together: and hoping that if hee could take the Towne, it would be a great discouragement to his enimies and a great encouragement to his owne soldiors: because this Citie is the strongest and greatest in all his Dominions. And his Maiestie did send out of *Suero* the honorable *Nicolaum Radzinił*, chiefe Governour of one Towne called *Wilde*, with a certain number of Horsemen & Footmen with a certain number of *Hungarians*: with the Honorable *Casper Bekize*¹⁴ to ye Citie of *Polotzko*, to stoppe the high wayes, that there might be no succourt from ye Prince of *Muscoue*. And for al that he tooke great paines for to be sodenly there: yet the wayes was so fowle, and the passages so crooked, that it was long or ever that they could come there. And because thet the King of *Polon* had sent defyaunce to the *Muscoue* King: hee doubting of the besiege of them of *Polotzko*, sent ayde to them of *Polotzko*, which came two daies before the Honorable *Nicolaue* came there: but hee comming thether did so stoppe the passages, that he could send no more succoures thether. And immediatlye after the King of *Polon* with his whole camp ordinance, bag and baggage, with great paines, hauing fowle wayes, with ye continual raine yet fell and the fowle wether, was constrained to make very small iorneyes: and in the meane tyme his forewarde tooke three Castells called *Cosianua*, *Crasne* and *Situo*, in their iorney, which they quickly spoyled and burnt. And the 11. day of August, his Maiestie with all his power came neere to the Tower of *Polotzko*, and pyched his camp not far from the Walles of the Towne: and then his Maiestie caused his campe in three places to bee intrenched against the Towne. And as the Towne being very strongly fenced with very strong Bulwarks and other Fortresses, and being very well prouided of all manner powder, shot and other Engines, and putting great confidence in the Castell which stode without the Towne: issued out of the Towne and forced the king of *Polon* to withdraw him selfe from that parte of the Towne where the Subberbs were, in which place the Castell stode: but in the end the *Polanes* had the victorye, and chaced the *Moscoes* into the Towne and Castell and set the Subberbs afyre. And in shorte time wholly destroyed it. And after this they did dayly underminde the ground, till they came under the cheefe gate of the Castell: but the almighty God at this time shewed his mightye power, for manye dayes, without ceassing we had great raynes: so that all labour was hindered: yet for the desyre that they had to ouereome their enimyes, nothing could discourage them: but dayly they did their endeour against the towne and Castell. And those within the Towne and the Castell, although their enemy with out was fearece and daily did shoot at them with greate ordinance, and neuer ceased daye nor night shooting

¹⁴) Casper Bekize was a Hungarian companion in arms of Batory.

and throwing of wilde fyre¹⁵ into the Towne, and although their houses were covered with strawe and reede, and such thinges are apte to take fire: yet they nothing dismayde, did day lye defend themselves with making prouision with raw Hides and other thinges fit for ye purpose, for to withstand the violence of the fyre: and verye valiantlye defended both the Towne and Castell and as fast as any was stroken downe, any other would steppe ouer him, and fyght stoutly in his roome: whereby it is seene that the *Moscoes* are verye valiaunt in keeping of a Hold: yet at the length GOD of his mercy shewed us a fayre day. For the 29. of August, our people with great diligence, and no small perill, waded thorough the ryuer, carying wilde fyre in one hand, and their weapon in the other, and manfullye run uppe the Hill, and made an assaulte to the breces of the Castell, & set them on fyre, and so with the shooting of the ordinaunce on the one side, & the casting of ye fyre on the other, the enimie was forced to forsake the Bulwarke, and to retyre, which gaue our soldiars such courage that they did follow the enimye thorowe the fyre, and thought to winne the Castell: but they did fayle of their purpose, because the force of the fyre was great, and the force of the enimy greater, they were forced to retyre with the losse of 27 of their menne, and verye manye wounded: And of our enimyes were slaine 200. The verye same daye the enimy did make a sygne as though hee would haue yeilded, but they ment nothing lesse: For they had prouided new Bulwarkes, and blinded our menne with the flames of fyre: therefore the Kinges Maiestie was fullye bent to show the uttermost that he coulde doe, because the enimye should haue no tyme to fortifye him. And therefore the next daye beinge the 30. daye of *August*, he caused all his armye, aswell Horsemen as footemen, to make an assaulte to the Town: and caused certaine Horsemen and Footmen, to make an assaulte to an other part of the Towne, where they had undermined the Wall, and threw downe a great peece of it, and set fyre to one parte of the Castell: and the place where they were the day before they recouered, where they found the *Mosco* digging and defending of him selfe: but the *Polon* droue him backe, and had him wholly in his power: and so the king of *Polon* beeing mooued with pittye, lothing to shed any christian blood, did giue pardon to all them that he found in the Castell, and them that would serve, hee tooke into seruice, which was a great number, because they would saue their goodes, & they that would, hee gaue them safe conduct to go into *Moscovi*,¹⁶ and those yt would not yeelde were these: the honorable *Basilius Iuanowitz*, *Telateuski Nicoleski Demetrius Michalowitz Schirbathi*, *Oho-leuski*, *Matthe Iuanowitz*: *Rzowki*, *Iuan Hrechnowitz*, *Susin*, *Petrus*

¹⁵) An inflammable composition commonly used for incendiary purposes during sieges.

¹⁶) The defenders of Polack who chose to "go into Moscovi" were certainly soldiers and Russian colonists settled in the city by Ivan the Terrible to replace the deported Byelorussian inhabitants.

*Inanowitz: Wolenski Lutzian, Tretiakow, Kdkouse,*¹⁷ whiche were all Captaines and Officers in the town and Castell, and therefore the King tooke them forceablye prisoners, and garded the Towne and Castell with his owne Soldiors. The nuber of the *Moscoues* that defended the Castell, were 6000. whiche moste parte was slaine and found dead in dyches, and of them in ye Towne there was no certaine number known, because a great number fled. And also there was found within ye town and Castell such store of ordinaunce, with powder, shot and lead and all other kinde of Artillerye, that there was thought there was not the like Towne nor Castell in Christendome.

And therefore his Maiestie seeing that GOD hath geuen him such victory ouer his enemyes, more than he deserued or looked for, gaue commaundment thorough all his Realme, to geue God praise and thankes.

FINIS

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¹⁷) There is some confusion in the names here as a result of defective punctuation in the newssheet.