



Piotr Szczurowski. *Podbój Prus w XIII wieku. Przyczyny „krzyżackiego” sukcesu [Conquest of Prussia in the 13th century. Reasons for success of the “Teutonic Knights”]. Sandomierz: Armoryka, 2019. 250 pp. ISBN: 978-83-8064-772-5.*

The topic of the eponymous “conquest of Prussia” by the Teutonic Order has been discussed in a significant number of monographs and articles on both individual elements and general aspects of this phenomenon, both in German and Polish language historiography. In this English-language discussions, one can also recall works devoted to the war (or wars) of the Teutonic Order with the indigenous inhabitants of the country between the lower Vistula and the lower Nemunas.¹ In the vast majority of cases, these previous publications contained a “classic” approach to the issue, focusing on the description of events and an analysis of their causes and consequences. Questions about the reasons for the final success of the Teutonic Order in these battles appear with much less frequency, often comprising of general syntheses that lead to quite general conclusions and remarks.² The reviewed book focuses on the issue of the conditions for the victory of the Order in Prussia, and there is no doubt that this is the first attempt at a book-length, in-depth approach to this issue. As such, it is important for the history of Prussia, Prussians, and the Teutonic Order.

The publication consists of an *Introduction* (pp. 13–37), four chapters (pp. 38–217), and a relatively short ending (pp. 218–231), all of which complements the list of sources and elaborations (pp. 232–241). Its author, Piotr Szc-

¹ William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975 (repr.: Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1994)); id., *The Prussian Crusade* (Lanham a.o.: Univerity Press of America, 1980); Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusade. The Baltic and the Catholic Frontier, 1100–1525* (London-Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1980) (Polish translation: *Krucjaty północne*, transl. Janusz Szczepański (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2009).

² Cf. e.g. Gerard Labuda, “Powstanie i rozwój państwa krzyżackiego w Prusach,” in Marian Biskup and Gerard Labuda, *Dzieje zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach. Gospodarka – Społeczeństwo – Państwo – Ideologia* (Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1988, 2nd edition), 96–263 (German translation: “Entstehung und Entwicklung des Deutschordensstaates in Preussen,” in Marian Biskup and Gerard Labuda, *Die Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen. Wirtschaft–Gesellschaft–Staat–Ideologie*, Klio in Polen 6 (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2000), 115–290).

zurowski, received his doctoral training in two fields, namely, humanities and economics, and deals with scientific research outside academic structures. In the foreword, he admits (p. [9]) that one of the inspirations for writing the book was professor Grzegorz Białuński, deceased in 2018, one of the main experts on the subject in the last at least half a century. Although remaining outside the structures of academic science in itself with regard to research methodology and its quality does not seem to be a negative factor, in the case of the reviewed book it has left clear traces that should be critically addressed. Firstly, the Author in various parts of his publication, especially in the *Introduction* and chapter I when conducting extensive divagations on the methodology of science and the nature of historical sciences (even verging on the philosophy of science, pp. 20–31, 38–48), seems to create an image of historians, including medievalists. This image presents them as researchers deprived of adequate knowledge of scientific methodology as such, and at the same time lacking the ability to clearly lecture. As a result, their findings often remain constricted to academic audiences, and are not disseminated broadly. Against this background, he shows his publication as the first, in which the title topic of the “conquest of Prussia” was clear and at the same time concise with the usage of all elements of scientific methodology (pp. 31–37). These considerations at times reflect the Author’s depth and methodological awareness, while in other parts they appear as extremely shallow and based on far-reaching generalizations. As such, they have a rather limited impact on the arguments made in four chapters of the book. Only the presence in historical research of two basic trends, indicated by the Author, for reasons incomprehensible to me only in the initial part of chapter I (pp. 38–48) and not in the *Introduction*, which are obvious to every historian, namely the idiographic trend (description of events and interpretation of cause-and-effect relationships between them) and the nomothetic trend (i.e., the analysis of historical processes and interpretation of their deep structures or regularities occurring in them) was somewhat reflected in the structure of these four chapters of the work.

In addition to methodological digressions, the Author also included in the *Introduction* the justification for the choice of research issues. One should fully agree with his diagnosis of the lack of a more thorough analysis of the causes and conditions of the military success of the Teutonic Order in Prussia. However, it is surprising that he did not systematically compile and review the opinions formulated in previous publications, even if only Polish ones. Instead, individual opinions of selected researchers were cited selectively (pp. 15–16), with reference to several foreign specialists (Hartmut Boockmann, Klaus Militzer, Sven Ekdahl

and Sylvain Gouguenheim, pp. 17–18). However, the entire work does not engage with these opinions or provide any systematic reference to them. Moreover, the Author did not consider it appropriate to present the state of research on the subject being discussed. Unfortunately, the list of literature and specific references to individual publications in the footnotes (cf. p. 33) do not replace a systematic reference to previous studies, which would also allow the Author to put his own study in the context of the processual creation of scientific knowledge. P. Szczurowski also did not make a deeper critical review of the sources used in his own analyses, limiting himself to a vague list of several chronicles and documentary sources (pp. 33–35). In a book-length study, this is unacceptable. In the *Introduction*, the Author formulates four theses of his study (p. 19), listed as follows: 1) external factors were decisive for the success of the Teutonic Order in the fight against Prussian communities, including the political support of the Papacy and the Empire and, as he puts it, “the demographic factor associated with the overpopulation of Germany”; 2) “a key role in the Teutonic Order’s conquest of Prussia” was to be played by Polish and Pomeranian princes, supporting the Order “especially in the first phase of conquest”, while the importance of crusaders from other European countries began to grow only over time; 3) “without external support, the Teutonic Knights would not have been able to conquer Prussia”; 4) the conditions associated with the autochthonous Prussians were of “secondary importance” in relation to the military success of the Order. The formulation of these arguments, which are then to be subjected to research verification (as opposed to asking open questions), marks the methodological approach characteristic of exact sciences. In those fields, it is assumed that it is possible to check the veracity of the thesis with the “zero-one” method. Unfortunately, in the field of historical science this is impossible, of which the Author is probably not fully aware (evidenced by his reference to the concept of “absolute” truth). There is no awareness that history in the modern sense is a discursive-interpretive science, and not an experimental-theoretical one which, on the basis of experimental verification of theses (hypotheses), would produce exact and certain knowledge. Perhaps, these shortcomings on the basis of the philosophy of science so appreciably exposed in the book influenced the rather overbearing statements of the Author, who believes that he has proved all his theses (p. 218).

Chapter I (*Geneza i ogólna charakterystyka stron konfliktu, czyli o podejściu do nauki historii / Genesis and general characteristics of the parties to the conflict, or the approach to the science of history*, pp. 38–59) contains a brief and at the same

time random presentation of the issue of the so-called ethnogenesis of Old Prussians and the history of the Teutonic Order until the appearance of the members of the corporation on the lower Vistula. With regard to the long-standing discourse on the processes of formation of Old Prussian communities, their conditions, dynamics and chronology, one can only note P. Szczurowski's reference to genetic studies from recent years (poorly documented only by references to a few websites in footnote 107 on p. 50). It is on this basis that he tries to formulate a hypothesis about the formation of Baltic communities (not only Prussians) "as a result of prehistoric pressure of Slavs to the territories previously occupied by Finno-Ugric peoples" (p. 51). On the other hand, the image of the Teutonic Order drawn by the Author contains numerous simplifications (as a result of extensive chronological flattening, e.g., p. 59). Also present are comparisons from different cultural circles which did not contribute much (e.g., the comparison of the brothers knights of the Teutonic Order with the Ottoman Janissaries, p. 58), as well as opinions which, due to the degree of simplification, are simply untrue or stereotypical. An example of this is the alleged greater internal cohesion of the Teutonic Order than in other large military orders due to the admission to the corporation "only Germans", pp. 57–58, opinion repeated on p. 210. This erroneous view, still functioning in Polish literature, that Konrad I Mazowiecki settled on the outskirts of his rule of the Teutonic Order as a result of the expulsion of this corporation from the Kingdom of Hungary is also duplicated (p. 57). As a result, it gives the impression that the offer of the Duke of Mazovia gave the Order a kind of a shelter from liquidation, while at that time it already had dozens of houses in Italy, a number of territories in the *Reich*, as well as properties in the Holy Land, Armenia and Greece (Achaia).

In chapter II (*Przebieg podboju Prus w XIII wieku / The course of the conquest of Prussia in the 13th century*, pp. 60–92) a simplified overview of the events consisting of the 'Prussian War' of the Teutonic Order, which lasted over 50 years, is presented. In relation to all these issues, the Author has not presented anything that has not been already known to the literature on the subject and in recent years illustratively outlined by Marian Dygo,³ or, more briefly, by Klaus

³ Marian Dygo, "Początki i budowa władztwa zakonu krzyżackiego (1226–1309)," in *Państwo zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach Władza i społeczeństwo*, ed. Marian Biskup and Roman Czaja (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008), 53–78, here 53–72; id., "Ekspansja terytorialna i władztwo terytorialne (1249–1309)," in *Państwo zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach*, 79–104, here 79–88.

Militzer.⁴ What is important, in the analysis of events, is that the Author discusses many chronological issues which are still controversial or, at least, unclear and undefined. This occurs somewhat on the agenda, presented as quite freely accepting one of the options and not justifying his own opinion (e.g., on the chronology of the expedition during which the Battle on the Sirgune River was fought, p. 64; the issue of the chronology of the outbreak of the so-called First Prussian Uprising, p. 75). However, a number of aspects of the 'Prussian War' were not mentioned by the Author at all. The most important include the construction of subsequent castles by the Teutonic Order, relations with the (eastern) Pomeranian princes, especially with Świętopełk II the Great, and taking into account the personal conditions inside the Teutonic Order, namely the individual features of the office of subsequent grand masters and landmasters (*Landmeister*) of Prussia, who were the main decision-makers regarding the military actions taken against the Prussian communities. These shortcomings make it difficult to consider the description of the "conquest of Prussia" contained in chapter II as demonstrative or illustrative, not only in general, but above all from the point of view of the goals that P. Szczurowski set himself in the book.

Chapter III (*Przyczyny sukcesu podboju Prus leżące po stronie podbijanych / The reasons for the success of the conquest of Prussia on the side of the conquered*, pp. 93–144) is an attempt to analyze these factors and circumstances affecting the military successes of the Teutonic Order, which were classified by the Author as resulting from the internal conditions of the existence and functioning of indigenous Prussian communities. In relation to geographical factors, such as the hydrographic network, soils, or climate, P. Szczurowski tries to argue for the thesis that "although only indirectly, they contributed to the defeat of the Prussians" (p. 102). It is impossible to agree with his opinion on the allegedly underdeveloped river network in the Prussian Country (p. 99), which was to negatively condition the defense capabilities of indigenous communities. On the other hand, the view of low-quality soils that determined the poor development of agriculture and the wider economy of Prussia, which was to affect the disproportionality in the military potential of both sides, is based on too many generalizations. It is also negatively verified by the fact that the same soils proved to be sufficient for the development of agriculture based on the three-field system during

⁴ Klaus Militzer, *Die Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2005, 1st edition), 63–70.

the colonization of the country in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. So, it was not the soil that was a problem from the Prussian point of view. In these attempts of analysis, there is no reference to the thorough work of Friedrich Mager,⁵ while the Author relies on the publications of Stanisław Srokowski, which itself referred primarily to the 20th-century. At that time, they were very vague in many aspects. Contrary to the ideas of P. Szczurowski (pp. 46, 93), natural conditions do not categorically determine historical and cultural processes in advance. Geographical factors do not dominate over cultural factors, but only are pre-established in relation to the latter – and this does not mean precedence.

The analysis of cultural factors seems to be a bit more in-depth. The opinions of the Author about the less developed economy of Old Prussian communities (pp. 103–106) and the low level of population of the country (pp. 107–109), which was to negatively determine the defensive potential of indigenous people, deserve special consideration here. However, in this case there is no clear documentation in favor of such a clear interpretation. Next, P. Szczurkowski points to psychosocial factors. These include beliefs, customs resulting from them and an undefined mentality. In the Author's opinion, they were to negatively affect the possibilities of communication and establishing cooperation between individual indigenous communities (pp. 112–115). Similarly, according to P. Szczurowski, the political system, which he defines as the "leader principle," was to negatively condition the Prussian defense potential (pp. 115–118). This chapter also discusses issues related to military matters. The Author tries to oppose the prevailing view in the current literature on the technical dominance of armament of the Teutonic Order and crusaders over the weapons of Prussian indigenous people. His dilemmas, in which he accepts older opinions about the use of full chainmail or the widespread use of a crossbow by western newcomers (pp. 122–128), together with an attempt to deny the opinion about the more developed western siege techniques (p. 129), constitute a poorly coherent set of thoughts. They are often contradictory to one another. Among them, probably only the one about a significant similarity of Old Prussian armament to the weapons used in the thirteenth century by Mazovians or Pomeranians appears to be scientifically valuable and worthy of closer analysis. On the other hand, much greater acceptance should be given to further considerations of P. Szczurowski regarding the political fragmentation of Prussian communities (pp. 129–135) and the oftentimes opportunistic attitude of the Old

⁵ Friedrich Mager, *Der Wald in Altpreußen als Wirtschaftsraum*, vol. I–II, Ostmitteleuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart 7/I–II (Köln–Graz: Böhlau, 1960).

Prussian aristocracy (pp. 136–143), which are aspects that he also included among the factors negatively conditioning the defense capabilities of indigenous people. However, as in earlier passages, in these reflections there is also a lack of a detailed and more nuanced analysis. An example of this missed opportunity can be seen in the absence of an analysis of the specificity of individual Prussian lands, the dynamics of periods of military operations, the influence of external factors, the changing policy of the Teutonic Order, etc.

In chapter IV (*Przyczyny sukcesu podboju Prus leżące po stronie podbijających / The reasons for the success of the conquest of Prussia on the side of the conquering parties*, pp. 145–217), P. Szczurowski undertakes an analysis of the factors determining the military successes of the Teutonic Order and relating to the corporation itself and supporting it with military and political factors, which in general can be described as “western”, in the sense of belonging to the Latin cultural circle of that time. Here, in the first place, the Author points to the support for the activities of the Teutonic Order in Prussia on the part of the Papacy, which in his understanding had political, legal (pp. 145–153), and propaganda dimensions (pp. 158–159). These statements are hardly relevatory, and one can cite both Eric Christiansen’s book, known to the Author, and the already unknown works of Tadeusz Manteuffel⁶ and Gerard Labuda.⁷ The characteristic feature of P. Szczurowski is the issue of papal support for the Order. He expresses its dynamics only as a sequence of responses of popes to events in Prussia, thus attributing them only reactive activities. However, at the very beginning of the book he expresses the view that the Prussian mission was very important for the Papacy (p. 145). There is also a lack of a personalized approach, beyond the space of the Papacy institutions, taking into account the individual actions of individual popes in the context of their own specific policy. The result of this is that the Author does not sufficiently explain the reason for the disappearance of the activity of popes in relation to Prussia, starting from the pontificate of Gregory X (1271–1276). Is the opinion on the change of the situation in Prussia in the early 1270s clearly in favor of the Teutonic Order an exhaustive explanation of this change? In the context of crusade propaganda, P. Szczurowski rightly emphasizes the role of mendicant orders (pp. 159–160), although he does not know the latest work on this issue,

⁶ Tadeusz Manteuffel, *Papiestwo i cystersi ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem ich roli w Polsce na przełomie XII i XIII w.* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1955).

⁷ Gerard Labuda, *Polska i krzyżacka misja w Prusach do połowy XIII wieku* (Poznań: s.n., 1937).

namely the book by Sławomir Zonenberg.⁸ The use of the analytical categories of social psychology, namely the concepts of ‘authority factor’, ‘imitation’ and ‘principle of compliance’ (pp. 163–170) to explain the reasons for the effectiveness of the propaganda of the crusades to Prussia deserves attention, although there are many detailed issues raised by the Author in the reviewed book that would require an in-depth analysis and an extension of the context with the comprehensively understood phenomenon of crusade propaganda in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. In the further part of chapter IV, P. Szczurowski points to other factors positively conditioning the successes of the Teutonic Order in the fight against Prussian indigenous people, including the political support of the Holy Roman emperors (pp. 175–178) and the local Central European rulers, including the (eastern) Pomeranian and Polish princes (pp. 179–186). In this field, the Author’s main thesis includes the view on the decisive importance of the support of Polish and (eastern-) Pomeranian princes in the first phases of the conquest of Prussia (in the 1230s), which was to form the basis for further expansion of the Order in this country (p. 186). At this point, P. Szczurowski seems to forget about the crusaders coming from the northern German lands, including from the city of Lübeck which was at that time dynamically developing and having extensive political aspirations (although he mentions the Lübeck people themselves briefly in another context on p. 215). It is difficult to unequivocally state on what premises the Author estimates the share of the armed contingents of the aforementioned princes as larger and more significant in relation to the armed troops brought to Prussia by princes and masters from the areas of the *Reich* (p. 186). P. Szczurowski assigns significant importance to the Crusaders from the German-speaking areas in the following decades of the ‘Prussian War’, when the support of the Polish and (eastern) Pomeranian monarchs decreased or even collapsed. Attempts at quantitative analyses of the size of this military support must be considered as pure divagations with a weak source base (pp. 199–202). Thus, his opinion about the alleged numerical superiority of the Crusaders’ troops in relation to the forces at the disposal of the Prussian communities raises doubts. It was expressed contrary to the previous opinions of the researchers (pp. 202–207). The Author’s view of a different “strategy” used by the Teutonic Order in Prussia in comparison to the methods undertaken by Polish princes, which consisted in gaining permanent control over a specific acquired area, among others, through the construc-

⁸ Sławomir Zonenberg, *Stosunki krzyżacko-mendykanckie w Prusach do 1466 roku* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2018).

tion of fixed fortified points, is nothing new. This was presented, for example, by Marian Arsyński⁹ and Friedrich Benninghoven,¹⁰ whom P. Szczurowski does not quote. At the same time, he attaches too much importance to the stage of gaining control over a specific area while omitting the equally important subsequent stage, when it was necessary to maintain this control through the effective defense of previously erected fortified points. And here the contingents of crusaders did not play a primary role, because usually most of them left Prussia after an impressive war campaign and returned home (as was the case, for example, of Přemysl Otakar II (Ottokar II of Bohemia)). The considerations concerning the colonization of the Prussian Land ending in chapter IV (pp. 213–217), which refer to the discussion on the number of crusaders, are based on the opinion questioned in the literature on the large quantitative scope of migration from German-speaking areas to the East.¹¹ New discussions on this issue should be carried out on the basis of a careful and at the same time detailed analysis of written sources. There can be doubts as to whether it would lead to any reliable findings due to the far insufficient state of archaeological research, which is the only one to provide measurable data on the settlement movement.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the publication of P. Szczurowski raises far-reaching doubts. On the one hand, the work contains a number of interesting and valuable observations, including those made using the conceptual framework of anthropology, sociology and social psychology. These indeed have the potential to further discussion and produce future in-depth analyses. On the other hand, there are numerous considerations and statements in the book based on overly extensive generalizations and simplifications. At the same time, the Author omitted a number of important aspects and phenomena within the analyzed issues. P. Szczurowski set himself the task of proving four previously formulated theses concerning the conditions of the military success of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, which cannot be proved on the basis of “zero-one” verification. In relation to

⁹ Marian Arsyński, *Budownictwo warowne zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach (1230–1454)* (Toruń: Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, 1995).

¹⁰ Friedrich Benninghoven, “Die Burgen als Grundpfeiler des spätmittelalterlichen Wehrwesens im preußisch-livländischen Deutschordenstaat,” in *Die Burgen im deutschen Sprachraum. Ihre rechts- und verfassungsgeschichtliche Bedeutung*, ed. Hans Patze, Vorträge und Forschungen XIX/I (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1976), 565–601.

¹¹ Cf. Michael Borgolte, *Europa entdeckt seine Vielfalt 1050–1250*, *Hadbuch der Geschichte Europas* 3 / UTB 2298 (Stuttgart: Verlag Eugen Ulmer, 2002), 236; also Hartmut Boockmann, *Der Deutsche Orden. Zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1994, 4th edition), 120.

basically all detailed aspects considered by P. Szczurowski, quantitative analyses assuming the use of numerical indicators that are reliable data are simply impossible. Only qualitative analyses are possible, but these must be based not on overly far-reaching generalizations and resulting simplifications. Instead, they can only be based on a detailed compilation and careful assessment of the information interpreted from the written sources. This type of qualitative research, however, will never allow for the unequivocal verification of any thesis, because this is their epistemological nature. They can only offer a coherent and multilateral answer to the previously formulated research question. This fundamental methodological difference between the exact sciences and the humanities, including the historical science, was not noticed by P. Szczurowski.

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