

The Impact of the Saxon Military on the Polish Army in the First Half of the 18th Century

Mit der Wahl Augusts des Starken aus dem Hause Wettin zum König von Polen-Litauen waren die Geschicke Polen-Litauens und des Kurfürstentums Sachsen in gewisser Weise miteinander verwoben. Der folgende Beitrag konzentriert sich auf die Veränderungen im Heer Polen-Litauens, die unter dem deutlichen Einfluss Sachsens stattfanden. Aufgrund des Umfangs des Themas orientiert sich der Beitrag an den wichtigsten Merkmalen dieser Veränderungen.

With the election of Augustus II the Strong from the House of Wettin as King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, the fates of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Electorate of Saxony were in some way intertwined. The following paper focuses on the changes in the army of the Commonwealth, which took place under the clear influence of Saxony. Due to the extensiveness of the topic, the paper is oriented towards their most important features.

After the death of King John III Sobieski on 17th June 1696, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth entered a period of *interregnum*, that is, the time between the monarch's death and the election of the next one. It was an extremely restless time, because of the political struggle that broke out between the supporters of two pretenders to the Polish crown. The first was François Louis de Bourbon, Duke of Conti, and the second was Frederick Augustus I of Wettin, Elector of Saxony. The nobility participating in ›the election Sejm‹ was so polarised that a ›double election‹ took place on 27th June 1697, during which the two conflicting sides chose their own candidates for king. This event began, as it were, the ›race for the crown of Poland‹,

in which the winner was to be the first who personally took the royal insignia. In this matter, Frederick Augustus I proved to be much more consistent than his opponent. He arrived in Poland in July, and, with the help of an extensive propaganda campaign and bribery, managed to expand his circle of adherents significantly. Despite resistance from the supporters of the Duke of Conti, Frederick Augustus I and the nobility supporting him took advantage of the Frenchman's absence, and managed to have the *pacta conventa* (a kind of list of pre-election promises) declared, and the coronation officially carried out. In this manner, Frederick Augustus I, the Elector of Saxony, became Augustus II and opened a new chapter in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, known as the ›Saxon era‹.

Augustus II the Strong, also known as Augustus II of Saxony, had a poor reputation as King of Poland. There was significant opposition among the Polish nobility towards the new ruler, while the king himself viewed his political plans not from the perspective of the royal throne, but rather from that of the Electorate of Saxony. Motivated by the interests of Saxony, he not only disregarded and misunderstood the issues of the Commonwealth, thus increasing the aversion of the noble community, but also involved the state in a war that had no relevance to its *raison d'État*. This conflict, known as the Great Northern War, severely weakened the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, it brought Poland and Saxony closer together at the military level, leading to the implementation of many beneficial changes in the Polish army. In this paper, we will examine this *rapprochement* from a military standpoint.

The Saxon Army Compared to the Army of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Before touching on the question of the infiltration of Saxon patterns into the army of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it is necessary to include an outline comparing its pre-reform armies of the early 18th century to those which served in the Electorate. The Saxon army had a reputation for being disciplined and well-trained (cf. Esposito 2019: 20). It was also, by the standards of the late 17th century, modern. From 1681, Saxony had a professional army of ~12,000 soldiers in peacetime. Its numbers were increased during war, so that, for example, in 1697 it reached a ceiling of ~22,000. In domestic hostilities, these forces could count on the support of a militia, obliged to defend the country. In 1703, its numbers reached 10,500 (cf. Wagner 2013: 50). These forces were relatively small, if we compare them, for example, to the

Prussian army, which in 1688 numbered ~30,000, while in 1697, as a result of wars, was increased to as many as 43,000 soldiers (cf. Jany 2021: 181–182), and then not to mention France's tremendous military forces. These numbers look different, however, if we compare them with the capabilities of a state many times larger, such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose main forces also consisted of a standing army, enlarged during wartime periods. The war quota of the Commonwealth, a state of more than 4,500,000 inhabitants, between 1683 and 1690, and resulting from the Turkish threat, was 48,000 soldiers. However, after the signing of the peace treaty in 1699 ending the war with the Turks, it was reduced to just 18,000 (cf. Wimmer 1956: 74–75). This state of affairs had to do with various internal reasons, such as the paucity of funds to maintain a large army, and the firm resistance of the nobility to the state building up a significant military force which, in the hands of the king, could become a tool to overthrow the system, sometimes referred to as ›noble democracy‹, in order to introduce the ›absolute monarchy‹ that was fashionable at the time. Further issues illustrating the significant differences between the forces of Saxony and the armies of the Commonwealth were the armament and the manner of fighting. The Saxon army, in line with trends in Western Europe, based its strength on a large, firearmed infantry fighting in line formation. By 1694, the Saxons had succeeded in equipping their troops with the new flintlock rifle and bayonet (cf. Wagner 2013: 52). It was a more reliable weapon, and it provided greater firepower than the previously used matchlock musket. Equipped with this, infantrymen conducted salvo firing while standing in the aforementioned ›line formation‹. This was a relatively shallow formation, numbering at the time between three and five ranks (cf. Lynn 2017: 64; Sikorski 1972: 331), and thus very long, allowing all soldiers to focus their fire on the target simultaneously. The flintlock rifle, thanks to the use of a socket bayonet, was also transformed into a short ›spear‹, if necessary, so that by the end of the 17th century, including the Saxon army, pikemen were probably completely withdrawn from the army. This, of course, had to do with the fact that soldiers, armed with bayonets, were able to face the threat of cavalry alone. Cavalry was also important in the Saxon army, but remained less numerous, and at the beginning of the Great Northern War was oscillating around 1:2 in relation to the infantry (cf. Wimmer 1956: 99). It consisted of cuirassiers, wearing cuirasses and helmets, and dragoons, who could fight on foot. Remarkably, although the cuirassiers mainly relied on their swords and so-called ›shock tactics‹ in combat, if necessary, they were also able to strike the enemy from a distance with cavalry carbines and pistols (cf. Wagner 2013: 53). Another important issue were the regulation colourful uniforms worn by the soldiers in accordance with

Western European fashion. On one hand, this was an expression of the prestige of the state, and on the other hand, a response to the problem of poor visibility on the battlefield, caused by clouds of smoke generated by gunfire.

The Commonwealth army at that time significantly differed from the Western standards described above. Because of the threat from Moscow, Turkey and the Tartar hordes plundering the eastern territories, the Polish military was based mainly on cavalry, whose ratio to infantry at the end of the 17th century was 4:5. Its core consisted of formations of the so-called ›national enlistment‹, which included the heavy hussar cavalry, armed with long lances, some even six metres in length, and the armoured cavalry, that is, medium cavalry wearing chainmail and fighting with spears, sabres and bows. The lightest formation was the light cavalry, which essentially differed from the armoured cavalry in the lack of protective equipment (cf. Wimmer 1956: 98–99). In addition to the formations mentioned above, dragoons and arquebusiers were also used, although they did not play as significant role as the traditional cavalry did. In the Polish system of warfare, the hussars acted as shock cavalry, breaking up enemy formations. The light cavalry supported the hussars in their actions, or led an uphill fight or pursuit. Infantry, on the other hand, played a mostly auxiliary role to the cavalry, defending field redoubts and having a more important role in capturing enemy fortifications. By the end of the 17th century, infantry organised according to German practices, known as ›foreign‹, were the dominant type of infantry formation. Interestingly, it was standardised at the time, following the patterns of Polish tradition and abandoning the old-fashioned clothes previously used and modelled on Western fashion, which were rooted in the Thirty Years' War aesthetics (cf. Wimmer 1978: 278). The Polish infantry were armed with bardiches (long, heavy axes) and matchlock muskets, which is why they were called ›fire folk‹. In combat, the infantry did not use a line formation, but fought in the old fashioned way, positioning themselves in small, relatively deep-lying units and conducting fire by performing a so-called ›fire assault‹.¹ Polish infantry uniforms differed significantly from those of the Western armies. It mostly consisted of a pale blue coat with linings in the colours of the individual units with fur-lined *kapuza* and *kolpak* caps (cf. Wimmer 1978: 278). While the Western armies, including the Saxon Electorate, had efficient, well-managed artillery, the Commonwealth had little in terms of ordnance. Moreover, it was outdated and did not play a significant role on the battlefield. The military history of the Polish-Lithuanian

1 When performing a fire assault, the last row would fire while standing over the other, kneeling ranks. Then the next row would stand to fire, and so on, until the last row.

Commonwealth had proven that its traditional formations were able to achieve stunning successes more than once, not only over armies of the Eastern type, but also against Swedish armies fighting in the Western European manner. However, the next war proved how far it was from its former glory, and that it needed general reforms.

The Great Northern War – The Failure of the Old Polish Art of War

The Great Northern War moved into the Commonwealth as a result of the defeat of the Saxon army of Augustus II, who lost to the Swedes at the Battle of Riga on 19th July 1701. Then, the so far undefeated army of Charles XII – a young, but distinguished commander leading a fanatical Swedish army called after his name: ›Caroleans‹ – marched in pursuit of the Elector of Saxony. In the face of the Swedish invasion, the Poles took two positions – some of the nobility decided to stay with King Augustus II and fight the invasion, despite the fact, it was brought on by him, while others stood in opposition to him. This finally led to the outbreak of civil war in 1704–1706, resulting in the abdication of the King. Armed resistance to the Swedish army quickly demonstrated the weakness of the traditional Polish military. The most important battle between the two forces took place in 1702 at Kliszów. During it, the Polish cavalry under the command of Hieronim Lubomirski, Grand Hetman of the Crown, first failed to defeat the Swedish cuirassiers, and then were repulsed by infantry fire. In the face of failure, Lubomirski withdrew the entire Polish force (~6,500), condemning those fighting alongside the Saxons to defeat (cf. Wagner 2013: 105–111). There is no doubt that the defeat of the Polish attack was due to the use of forces that were too weak and Lubomirski's evident lack of will to fight. Lubomirski was later one of those who criticised the condition of the Polish army. It is possible that the strike he led was intended as a kind of ›survey of the terrain‹, and, in the face of defeat, he decided to withdraw his forces as, in his opinion, they were unsuitable for fighting such an opponent as the Swedes. In the years following this failure, we can observe a phenomenon that could be described as the ›Swedish complex‹, i.e. the Polish army was afraid of open battles with the enemy, waging ›hit and run‹ skirmishes, and even avoiding clashes with the enemy altogether (cf. Nagielski 2001: 29). What made the hussars, once the terror of the Swedes, cease to be a threat to them? Well, the decline in the ›spirit‹ of the Polish formations was responsible for this. Since the Vienna relief expedition of John III Sobieski, the Polish army had significantly lost its quality in the

form of weaker training and morale. Undoubtedly, this was influenced by the poor financial condition of the state, translating into a shortage of supplies for the troops, but also by the political instability and infighting between different factions, taking different positions towards the enemy invasion. When Augustus II returned to the throne in 1709, and the Swedish threat had effectively passed, it was time to rebuild the military condition of the Commonwealth. The nobility and the king were then faced with the problem of whether to try to raise the failing traditional military from its knees, or to invest in a completely new quality.

The Influence of the Saxon Military on the Transformation of the Commonwealth Army

The first steps to improve the state of the army were taken even before the return of Augustus II, during the Lublin Sejm in 1703, the Grodno Council in 1705 and during the so-called ›Warsaw General Council‹ in 1710. These were mainly related to financing and increasing the size of the ›Old Polish‹ army and establishing the proportions of the various formations in the new statute. Nevertheless, in these steps, certain new patterns can be discerned too, which can be linked to the Saxons. The first of these was an order from 1704 for modern muskets with flintlocks. This was a significant move towards the gradual introducing the new weapons to replace the old matchlock muskets, which was successfully completed in 1717–1719 (cf. Ciesielski 2009: 464, 470; Wimmer 1956: 259). The Grodno Council of 1705, on the other hand, brought about an increase in the proportion of dragoons and light cavalry in relation to the armoured and hussar – formations that were less useful against the modern Swedish army. Moreover, a modern system of infantry organisation was also successfully introduced. The infantry was divided into regiments of 1,500 men, consisting of two battalions, as tactical and organisational units at the same time (cf. Wimmer 1956: 298–299). This was a significant change from the previous order, when the infantry was divided into small units of ~600 men. The new system was unfortunately not followed at the time by an increase in infantry dominance; however, a structure in line with Western European practice was introduced. Another important issue was the introduction of modern military regulations for the dragoons in 1710, authored by Jakub Henryk Flemming and translated from German into Polish (cf. Biblioteka im. Książąt Czartoryskich w Krakowie, Rękopis nr 1687: 419). What should be emphasised here is that this was the first Polish-language set of regula-

tions, in addition of Saxon origin. Another set was translated and introduced in 1714, this time intended for the infantry (cf. Wimmer 1978: 325–326, Biblioteka Naukowa Państwowej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie, Rękopis nr 974: 145–150, 175–200). Despite the measures taken, this was not yet a change that could be regarded as either essential or even-widespread.

Changes of greater impact did not occur until 1717, during the so-called ›Silent Sejm‹. Its circumstances can be regarded as symptomatic of the internal problems of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under Augustus II. When he came to the throne again in 1709, he decided to secure his power under the pretext of a threat from the Swedes and their supporters. To this end, he brought in a powerful Saxon force to the Crown (Poland), whose numbers reached a ceiling of 20,300–21,500 soldiers in mid-1713 (cf. Ciesielski 2019b: 42). However, the threat from these opponents was only slight at the time. We can therefore presume that Augustus II wanted to defend himself against any possible opposition from the Poles, and to keep the troops of the Commonwealth in check. The ostentatiousness of this move is underlined not only by the number of forces brought in, but also by the fact that they were sustained by high contributions from the Polish population. In order to increase his control even more, the king conscripted many officers, especially of Saxon origin, into the crown army, giving in part an indication of his distrust of the Poles. The fiscal oppression, as well as the frequent violence of the Saxon contingent towards the civilian population (cf. Gierowski 1953: 32–35) finally led to the armed opposition of the nobility in the form of the so-called Tarnogród Confederation, which broke out in 1715. During it, the Polish troops had an advantage over the Saxons who were operating in an area that was essentially foreign to them. Moreover, the Poles employed a strategy of hit-and-run fighting, and avoided major clashes. However, this still failed to hide the fact that the Saxon army was superior to the confederate forces, having an advantage in armament, training and organisation. This was confirmed at Kowalewo on 5th October 1716, the largest battle of the war, when a charge by the traditional Polish cavalry was completely stopped by the musket and artillery fire of the Saxons (cf. Ciesielski 2019a: 46). The severe defeat of the confederates led to negotiations, the arrangements of which were sealed a year later at the ›Silent Sejm‹. One of the points of the reforms to be undertaken was the removal of the Saxon army from the Crown (only a small royal guard remained) and the creation of a small, but modern army.

The army's strength was set at a mere 24,000 soldiers (18,000 in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and 6,000 in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), which had to do with the state's financial limitations and the previously mentioned lack of confidence

in entrusting a large professional army to the state. This consisted of, in the Crown: 6,000 cavalry, 4,000 dragoons and 8,000 infantry, while in Lithuania: 2,300 cavalry, 1,500 dragoons and 2,300 infantry (cf. *Volumina Legum* 1860: 184–196). Because the financial outlay for each unit did not include a separate fund for officers' emoluments, each officer received a salary based on the pay rates of an ordinary private. This practice, which had been going on for more than 100 years, led to a significant depletion of the army's actual full-time military personnel, and this was also the case here. The actual numbers are estimated to have been only 16,000 out of a planned 24,000 (!) (cf. Wimmer 1966: 160). Leaving aside the issue of numerous shortcomings, when discussing the influence of the Saxon military on the new model of the army of the Commonwealth, we should focus on the positives. These included the introduction of new uniforms. The new pattern of military clothing was directly modelled on that of the Saxons. This was reflected not only in the cut, but also in the colour – Saxon red replaced the traditional blue in outerwear. Further elements were the tricorne headgear, the high caps of the grenadiers and the white trousers (cf. Wimmer 1966: 170). Another aspect was melee weapons. At the same time, apart from Saxon muskets, broadswords and swords of Saxon origin were also added to the equipment. Equipped with modern weapons and uniforms, the infantry and dragoons also fought in a manner borrowed from the Saxons. Long lines of four ranks were formed to fight. Soldiers were trained in Western European techniques of fire, both in ranks and platoons (cf. Wimmer 1966: 170). The organisation of the infantry and dragoon units also underwent further structural transformations, modelled on Saxon practice. The infantry regiment of the Guards was divided into two battalions of 12 companies (each ~70 soldiers), while the regular regiments consisted of one battalion. The dragoon regiments were weaker. The dragoon guard regiment had ~587 men, and consisted of eight companies, while the average ones did not exceed a strength of 341 dragoons divided into six smaller companies (cf. Wimmer 1966: 161–165). Further points worth noting are the introduction of the office of military inspector who oversaw the numerical status of individual regiments, checked with an attendance list the identity of officers, and had full access to all documentation kept by the unit. Such inspectors were common in modern armies at the time. A second manifestation of modernisation was the invalidity fund, collected for the benefit of veterans injured in service (cf. Wimmer 1966: 162–166; Wimmer 1978: 315–316). The infantry and dragoons, thanks to the regulations introduced and the strict approach of the officer cadre to discipline, were well trained and disciplined. However, changes of a similar magnitude did not happen in the national enlistment, where the only step in the di-

rection of modernisation was to standardise the size of the banner, so the cavalry unit. Apart from this element, the old-type formations remained essentially unchanged. To make matters worse, the process of loosening discipline and the lowering of real combat capabilities increased through their ranks (in fact, the hussars, for example, appeared in their full equipment only at honour ceremonies connected to officers' funerals, cf. Wimmer 1966: 166–168; Kitowicz 1925: 373). These were the consequences of a resistance to the modern approach of managing an army, evident by the prospect of an increase in the quality of infantry and dragoons with the adoption of West European models. The process of change in the Polish military only continued after the death of the next of the Wettins – Augustus III. Up to that point, the army had remained almost unchanged since 1717.

Conclusion – The Role of the Saxon Army in the History of the Polish Military

The Saxons and the Wettin dynasty, as can be seen from the above outline, did not feature prominently in Polish history. However, this does not change the fact that it was thanks to them that Western European models entered the Polish military. Rooted in traditional but outdated patterns, the Polish military art needed reform, and it was the Saxon army that became the model for this. Thanks to the agreement of the 1717 Sejm, the army of the Commonwealth acquired a new, more modern shape. The military reforms of the ›Silent Sejm‹ functioned in the army unchanged until 1764, and they were the ones that gave a Western direction to the positive changes in the army. The Polish military in this shape proved successively at the Battle of Zieleniec (1792) and Raclawice (1794) its prowess and that it could face the modern Russian army. In the context of considering the last century of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it is worth citing this fact as an example of the positive influence of Saxony on Polish history.

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