

The last flotilla. Augustus II Wettin's privateer squadron in 1700-01. Organization, military operations, political background.

At the beginning of April 1701, the inhabitants of the coastal villages of Puck Bay witnessed an event that had not taken place here for over half a century. A regular battle took place in the roadstead between two Swedish frigates and several ships under the Polish flag. It was an extraordinary event, as there had been no naval forces in the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth since the time of Władysław IV reign.

Establishment of privateer squadron by king Augustus II was the last successful attempt to create a larger naval forces in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. According to historical sources, Augustus established a small flotilla of a few, or a dozen ships, whose captains were recruited in Denmark and Dunkirk (Cornelius Neuvell, commander of the frigate “Postilion”), who were to take up the fight against Swedish Baltic freight. One of their bases became the Puck Bay, from where they quickly launched actions against the Swedes and captured a number of ships. This activity did not go unnoticed by Swedish intelligence. Increasingly serious reports by Swedish agents in Poland alerted Charles XII, King of Sweden, who ordered his ships on a punitive expedition. Two Swedish frigates, which then stormed the Puck roadstead, fired on units in the service of the Polish king, recaptured some of the ships taken here, and their crews plundered one of the coastal villages. This event immediately triggered a reaction from the voivode of Inowrocław, Franciszek Gałęcki, who insistently protested against the violation of Polish territorial waters at the Swedish representative in Gdańsk, Per Cuypercrona.

The genesis of the privateer flotilla and its activities in the political context of this period are still shrouded in mystery. The research on this issue, started by Przemysław Smolarek in the 1950s, did not go beyond the source contribution stage. How was the squadron established? What role in its establishment did Denmark play as the only “sea” ally of Augustus? What were the reactions of diplomatic representatives and governments of the Baltic states (and not only) to its activities? How big economic repercussions in Baltic freight it caused? In addition to strictly military activities, was it also supposed to serve other purposes, e.g. political? Was its activity a form of hybrid war, planned by Augustus as the elector of Saxony, which was to draw the neutral Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth into the war with Sweden? We still do not know the answers to these and many other questions.

This project aims to extract from the darkness of oblivion this bold, though short-lived undertaking of Augustus II, and to look at it not only in a strictly military context, but above all in terms of the policy of the Baltic States and their mutual contacts (both diplomatic and economic) on the threshold of the 18th century. Undertaking research on this topic requires a series of queries and studies on the resource of several European archives: Hauptstaatsarchiv in Dresden, Riksarkivet in Stockholm, Rigsarkiv in Copenhagen, and Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs in Riga. The analysis of the information obtained there will allow to answer the above questions.

Research on this topic will also help to clarify many puzzles in the context of the political actions of the King Augustus in the first years of his reign, as well as many aspects of international politics in the initial phase of the Great Northern War, until today still largely unexplored. Taking into account also the fact that members of the Polish political and military elite were involved in the creation of the fleet, it may also help to break down some of the myths about the Saxon era, still functioning in Poland, as an époque of political indolence and impotence, and to expand the still not the richest state knowledge about it.