

HISTORY

The Union of Lublin in 1569 created a political union of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy Lithuania which became known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While the Kingship/Grand Duke was always an elected (though dynastic) position, this new political entity created one of the largest states in Europe and a potentially formidable army. The new state was at the nexus of eastern and western Europe as well as Islamic influences to its southern border. This influence on its armies helped to develop the legend that became armored hussars.

In the early 16th century cavalry still ruled the battlefield in the east and armored noble cavalry was still king. The first hussars in Poland appear in Dec. 1501 as *hussarorum alias raczew*. The name hussar is sometimes spelt *usar*. Rychard Brzezinski believes that the origins of the name Hussar goes back to Byzantine light cavalry called *chosarioi* recruited from Balkan people – especially Serbs. The Serbian name for themselves was “*gusar*”. The retinue of hussars of Stefan Bathory (1576 – 86), when he was King of Poland, established them as a permanent military formation. They were originally, lower-level gentry, but eventually they were adopted by the nobility as a whole as the cavalry formation they wanted to emulate.

Hussars were raised and organized as state troops beginning in 1563. Supplemental units were raised by the Sejm as needed. In addition to state hussars, there were also Court or Guard troops, the number varying between 600 in 1609 and 460 in 1651. Magnates and districts might raise private units as needed.

Units of Polish hussars eventually took on the air of elite cavalry that would be sought after. From the Thirty-Years War till the Saxon period Polish lancers were hired outside of the Commonwealth as well as employed within. Colonel Krzysztof Szczodrowski recruited Polish Cavalry for Wallenstein in 1633.

ORGANIZATION

In 1600 Hussars formed 75% of the cavalry, but as firearms and cannons became more prevalent, by the 1630's they made up 30% of the cavalry. The remainder was formed from light and medium cavalry. The word “pulk” became the name for a regiment, but was akin to the mediaeval unit, “battle”. Between two to forty banners (usually five to twelve) were grouped together into a pulk.

Rotas were made up of 50 – 200 cavalymen. They are grouped into Choragiew, the equivalent of a medieval banner. Originally the size of the rota varied and several were often combined into a banner (called a choragiew). By 1600 both terms were equivalent of a company. The strength of rotas varied from 100-150 to up to 300 horse for the wealthier nobles.

The captain of a company was called a Rotmistrz (Master of the Rota). A Rotmistrz raised the company and was initially responsible for its set-up. The rotmistrz was assisted by a porucznik (lieutenant) who was either elected by the ranks or later appointed by the rotmistrz.

Each company consisted of a "Companion" (Towarzysz) and two-three "Retainers" (Poczet) which was considered a "Retinue" (Pocholiks). In the late 17th century pacholik was replaced by the term pocztowy (of the poczet) or szeregowy (of the ranks). By the 1630's the porucznik exerted actual command of the unit. Assisting the porucznik was a deputy lieutenant called a namiestnik (place holder). The standard bearer (chorazy) was selected as a badge of honor from the younger Towarzysz . In 1605 units had six musicians out of one hundred men that included kettledrums and trumpets .

Hussars initially bore the cost of equipping a soldier. They then received pay and supplemental income from war booty. The length of service was 3 -5 years.

EQUIPMENT

Full plate lancers were abandoned by the later part of 16th century. By 1550's horse armor was abandoned and lighter armed Serbian Usars and Hungarian Hussar style was adopted with a mail shirt, helmet, two swords, lance and early on a shield. In 1576 Stefan Batory was elected King and Polish Hussars standardized their equipment to the Hungarian Guard. Shortly thereafter shields were abandoned and breastplates were adopted.

By the end of the 16th century/early 17th century lancers adopted a metal cuirasses, arm guards, nasal guard on the metal helmet, two swords and lance as standard equipment. The helmet was a "pot" style helmet with a "lobster" tail, cheek guards and nasal protector. In the early period, plumes were sometimes worn in the back and on the nasal.

Hussar armor was burnished rather than blackened often with brass fittings and details. The hussar helmet (Szyszak) was steel with bronze fittings. Pacholiks were given cheaper helmets such as kapalin's (capellina – Italian for hat) or pot helmets. The hussar helmet could be adorned with feathers or plumes on the nasal, top or neck. This was more prevalent in the early part of the 17th century than later.

Hussars originally wore full lengthed mail shirts. Arm guards (karwasze) eventually were used when mail shirts went away. Pacholiks might have mail armor or just cuirasses, as well as a fur cape. As a result of the war with Sweden in the 1650's Hussars lightened some of their armor.

A cape was made of felt, lynx or wolfskin. Many of the felt capes were highly decorated and stylized with stripes or geometric designs. Some hussars wore burka capes made of camel hair where the hair was on the outside.

UNIFORM

The hussar uniform was originally based upon Hungarian dress, that was adapted to Poland's climate by making it warmer and longer. This is an interesting contrast to Peter the Great, who abandoned Russian dress in favor of fashionable western uniforms that was not practical in Russian climate.

Blue was commonly the color of infantry. In the cavalry, red was used by the upper nobility with other colors worn by lesser nobility that includes green, buff, black, pink, orange and brown.

Retainers would have coats in similar color as the towarzyszc. They would have karczma caps of blue or red with lamb's wool band that is white or grey.

Capes varied from plain woolen or felt woven patterns to more exotic pelts for more elite units that include tiger, panther, wolf, leopard and lynx. In some paintings of hussars from the 17th century they wear capes in bright colors and stripes in the style of Navajo blankets. Woolen capes called Kilims or Welens had a base color with striped of various colors and widths. They varied from being brightly colored to some pacholiks with single colors such as white. The hussars of the Voivode of Sandomierz reportedly had plain red kilims.

Boots would be mid-calf to ankle high yellow to light yellow in color with some pacholiks having red or brown. Hussar trousers would be blue, green, brown or black.

WINGS OR NOT

Not all hussars had wings, but all heavy winged cavalry were hussars. Wings seemed to have been added to the hussar equipment in the late 16th century. At first wings seem to have been fixed to the saddle, but by the late 17th century they were attached to the back plate. There are several theories as to why wings? They kept Cossacks from lassoing riders, they made noise as the hussars rode and/or they frightened horses and soldiers. Brzezinski seems to have dispelled the noise theory as a result of re-enactors on the set of "With Fire and Sword". The others are up for grabs, but in the end it just might have been the fact that they looked impressive and added to the martial bearing of the unit, making it more elite. The fact that not all hussars had wings adds to the theory that eliteness was attached to them. Eagle feathers were attached to a wooden frame. These were either curved forward, backward or straight, but angled away from the rider.

WEAPONS

There were several styles of swords used by hussars, sometimes carried at the same time. Swords had black leather grips and brass fittings. The sabre was designed for delivering slashing blows at the gallop. One design was known as karabela. Hungarian style or karabela swords had an open hilt. Polish sabers had a closed, "D" shaped hilt. When attacking mailed or armored troops they carried a long straight blade (130 – 160 cm) called the koncerz. A third type of blade sometimes used instead of the koncerz was the palasz – a single or double edged sword (90 – 100 cm long).

Additional weapons carried by hussar towarzyszc were bows and pistols. Powtoz were armed with rifles, considered less elegant than the bow. Pistols were wheel-locks for most of the 17th century. The rifle carried was a banolet wheel-lock carbine.

The Hussar lance was called the "kopia" which had a distinct ball shaped handguard called a "galka" (knot). The lances were hollowed out part way, varied in length from 4 – 6 meters and weighed 4 ½ pounds. Some lances were red decorated with painted feathers and heraldic devices. Others could be fluted or painted to look like they were gilded.

HORSES

Some horses pictured in the Constantine Roll and other documented sources show horses that had their bottom half dyed brick red, but this also might have only been done for ceremonial occasions. Horses were white, black or brown.

FLAGS AND PENNANTS

Lance pennants were uniform within companies and generally followed a 2-color design. The size of the pennants varied from 1 to 3 meters in length. One lance pennant was 390cm long, by 79 cm tall and from the tail to the fork is 104 cm.

Lance pennants varied between single point "dragon" tailed and dual pointed "swallow" tailed. Companies all usually had the same pennant design though the "Courtier's" company seems to have varied between retinues. Some examples from 1605 include dragon tailed pennant with twelve chevrons pointing toward the tail in red and white alternating. Other examples are white dragon tail with red knights cross near the fly. The top is red, bottom white and a knight's cross towards the fly has reversed colors. Swallow tailed in six parts starting from the fly to tail - Blue over yellow / yellow over blue / blue over yellow.

On Sobieski's Vienna campaign (1683) most pennants were swallow tailed that included some of these designs:

Jan Sobieski – crimson over blue

Jakob Sobieski – yellow over red

Aleksander Sobieski – black over yellow

Prince Stanislaw Lubomirski – red over white

FeliksKazimierzPotocki – Voivode of Krakow – black over yellow (16)

UNITS

Cichowski and Szulczynski have identified nine regular crown hussar units for the period 1655 – 1660:

1. King's Old Guard
2. Stanislaw Potocki, Grand Hetman of the Crown
3. Jerzy Lubomirski, Marshal of the Crown, later Field Hetman
4. AleksanderLudwikNiezabitowski, Starosta of Lublin, King's New Guard
5. Jan Zamoyski, Woiwode of Sandomierz
6. WladyslawMyszkowski, after July 1658 AleksanderLubomirski, Master of the Horse
7. Adam Dzialynski, Starosta of Bratianski
8. Stanislaw Lanckoronski, Woiwode of Ruthenia and Field Hetman. After April 1658 Stefan Czarniecki, also Woiwode of Ruthenia
9. Stanislaw Lubomirski, Starosta of Spisz in 1660 and later of the Cossacks (30)

A SAMPLE OF HUSSAR BATTLES:

Kokenhausen -23 June 1601.

KrzysztofMikolajRadziwill (known as "The thunderbolt") of the Polish –Lithuanian Army with 300 infantry, 2,700 cavalry and 9 cannons, faced 900 infantry, 4,000 cavalry and 17 cannons under Carl Gyllenhielm of Sweden. Polish cavalry broke the Swedish left flank. A Swedish counter-attack on the right was broken by a Polish counter-attack by Hussars.

Kircholm – 27 September 1605.

Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, Grand Hetman of Lithuania with 1,000 infantry, 2,600 cavalry and 5 cannons, versus 2,000 cavalry, 9,000 infantry and 11 cannon under the command of Charles IX of Sweden. A feint caused the Swedish troops to leave a secure position and a simultaneous charge on the left flank and center by the hussars rolled up the Swedish line

Kłuszyn – 4 July 1610.

6,500 troops and 2 cannon of the Commonwealth forces under Hetman Stanislaw Zoikiewski against 30,000 troops and 11 cannons under Dmitry Shulsky and Jacob de la Gardie. The Commonwealth forces consisted of 5,500 hussars. The hussars made multiple attacks against the Russian center and fortified camp with no success. Eventually an attack on the left flank put pressure on the center and in the ensuing retreat the Russian army disintegrated.

Khotyn – 2 September to 9 October 1621.

The battle was fought over the course of a month between troops of the Commonwealth and Cossack on one side and the Ottoman Empire and allies on the other. The Commonwealth forces were 60,000 men, half Polish-Lithuanian and half Cossacks. The Ottoman forces numbered 150,000 of which 13,000 were allies. The battle centered on the fortress of Khotyn was Ottoman forces tried to break the Commonwealth forces that became a series of battles and heroic charges until the winter snow force the Porte's forces to retreat.

Trzciana – 27 June 1629.

Forces of the Commonwealth and the Holy Roman Empire fought Gustav II of Sweden near a town of then Prussia. Commonwealth forces consisted of 1,300 hussars, 1,200 light cavalry and 2,000 reiters against 4,000 cavalry and 5,000 infantry. Cossacks and reiters held the Swedes with a frontal assault while hussars outflanked the infantry. The Swedish forces were pushed back in retreat and forced to withdraw to Marienburg.

Warsaw – 28-30 July 1656.

Commonwealth Forces and Tartars versus Swedes and Brandenburgers. King John Kasimirz with 36,000 troops (of which 950 were hussars) and 18 cannon took on 20,000 Swedes and 47 cannon in an effort to retake the capitol. This three day battle consisted of swirling cavalry attacks, bombardments and outflanking attacks. Commonwealth forces were eventually forced to retreat leaving the city to the Swedes, but they were not able to hold onto it in the long run.

Vienna – 11-12 September 1683.

About 102,000 defenders of Vienna against 150,000 Ottomans. The Commonwealth provided 20,000 cavalry of which a third were hussars. At the last possible moment the relief forces emerged from the woods and led a mass cavalry charge on the besieging forces that devolved into miniature melees between different units of charging and counter-charging troops. The Ottomans were routed.

Battle of Klissow – 8 July 1702.

Commonwealth and Saxon forces battle against the Swedes in the Great Northern War. Charles XII commanded 12,000 men and 4 cannon vs August II with 22,500 men and 46 cannon. Polish hussars beat back a Swedish flank attack, but the counter attack of the hussars was also defeated. Withdrawal of the hussars by Hieronim Lubomirski left the Saxon flank open to attack and defeat.

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