

Battle of Grunwald from 10

“We will crush them!” said the Grand Master, who always underestimated the Poles and Lithuanians, confident in the belief that his army was better armed and experienced.

The Grand Master seeing that the Lithuanian army was less numerous than the Poles, and less well armed, diverted some Krzyżacy who were engaged in fighting the Poles, to crush the dangerous Lithuanians of Vytautas the Great, who was the Allied Commander in the battle. Indeed Krzyżacy started to press the Lithuanians. Vytautas the Great realised his men were under pressure, and ordered a tactical retreat, to bring the Krzyżacy to the forests. A big force of Lithuanians started to withdraw, and the Krzyżacy happily started to chase them. Only a small force, mainly of Russians from Smolensk and some Lithuanians who were very close to the Polish knights, stayed to fight. One Russian regiment was smashed completely by the Krzyżacy. But not many Krzyżacy chased the Lithuanians. Some of them were afraid of the sight of the forests, suspicious that this may be a trap. Indeed it was, because when the Lithuanians went into the Zevaldas forest across the narrow river Morence, a reserve force of fresh Polish knights suddenly came out of the trees like lions and started to kill the surprised Krzyżacy without mercy. The retreating Lithuanians made an immediate about-turn, and assisted the Poles.

But the Lithuanians’ tactical withdrawal was dangerous for the Polish lines, as it left them with an exposed left flank. Nine Crusader regiments were able to attack the Polish knights from that side, and some succeeded in getting behind the Polish front. A complete surrounding of the Poles was prevented by three regiments from Smolensk, and some Lithuanians who had not retreated.

It was now that Krzyżacy would gain some successes and even they were close to the end of this battle.

In the Krzyżacy’s favour, Marcin from Wrocimowic, the Chamberlain of Krakow had been awarded the honour of bearing aloft at the heart of the battle, a big Polish flag marked with the sign of a white Eagle. When the Krzyżacy saw this, they supposed that King Jagiello must be nearby, fighting at the head of his troops in the European fashion. They did not realise that Jagiello had stationed himself atop a small hill to watch the battle, as the Grand Master did - a tactic that was followed by Genghis Khan and his successors.

With enormous courage and determination, a squadron of German knights crashed into Marcin, wounded him, cast down the Polish flag, and triumphantly sang "Christ ist erstanden" (Christ has risen). In a normal battle this would have signalled the defeat of the army to which the flag belonged, and the Krzyżacy so interpreted it, with hundreds of knights rushing to kill the hypothetically fallen king, and disperse his immediate entourage.

Jagiello heard the singing, and asked if it was the Krzyżacy who were singing. The knights near their King, protecting him, assured him that it was the Krzyżacy. He was worried since maybe the Krzyżacy would win the battle. It was like they were celebrating victory.

They obviously thought that would be the end of the battle, but this was no ordinary battle. Knights from Krakow, including Czarny Zawisza, went to defend the flag, and another wild battle broke out. The Polish knights, more determined than the Krzyżacy, saved their flag and drove back the crashing Krzyżacy who expected to finish the battle, which actually got worse and wilder. Their singing stopped, and the sounds of war could be heard again.

On the other side while the Krzyżacy were singing, Vytautas' Lithuanians did not sleep. The great leader was fixing his regiments to reform the Lithuanians and Tartars - who did not abandon the battle area - and to rejoin the battle. The Krzyżacy are celebrating too early! Let’s show them what we Lithuanians can do. They can start praying for their souls, because they won’t have enough time to do that when we arrive! Shouted Vytautas to his knights and with great speed went back to the battle like a real storm. Vytautas in the first line immediately killed two Krzyżacy with his sword.

The voices of returning Lithuanians were heard by the Poles and Bohemians, boosting their morale. It was now two in the afternoon, the hottest time of that long brutal day and Jagiello’s and his cousin's strategy, started showing results. The German and other knights, among the bravest men in the world, had been sweating in the saddle since dawn and some were beginning to tire, especially those who had chased the Tartars.

When Jagiello saw his cousin coming back to the battle, he released a contingent of his knights who had not yet seen battle, and when these fresh warriors joined the battle, the line of Krzyżacy was slowly driven back.

But the Grand Master saw this, and threw a reserve of his own in to help his men in the battle. The fight was now a general melee, with individual swordsmen fighting each other, and one horseman galloping after another and cutting him down from the rear. The battle was so formidable with the advantage swinging from one side to the other and back again.

A worried German commander reported to his Grand Master, “I have ridden everywhere, Sire, and I assure you the Polish and Lithuanian foot soldiers have not been involved yet. They must be hiding in these damn dark forests. We have to eliminate them”.

“Don’t worry, we are winning. I feel that, and soon we will join in the battle to crush them. The foot soldiers will not join, they are afraid of us”.

At almost 6 o’clock Jagiello gave a signal, and from the dark woods the Polish and Lithuanian peasants began to emerge, walking gingerly at first, then half-running with their pitiful wooden weapons in the air, and finally surging forward with cries they might have used in hunting bear. On and on they came closer, the cries growing louder and more shrill, scaring the Krzyżacy who this time could not see could not see white horses and white dressed Knights, but many foot soldiers advancing on them. The Krzyżacy killed many of them, but the vast army of foot soldiers never stopped advancing.

Now the Krzyżacy had to face knights and foot soldiers. Blood and bodies were everywhere, hampering the movements of the knights. Desperate voices of those dying in agony could be heard everywhere. The Poles and their allies were gaining ground. The stubborn foot soldiers made the Crusaders nervous, and they did not know whom to fight first. The Krzyżacy infantry had been crushed early, because of the bad tactic of von Jungingen. Von Jungingen’s face was ashen and his throat suddenly parched, realising that this was going to be a battle to the death and that his knights might lose. “Now comes the time when we defend the cause of Jesus Christ with our own lives! After me!” Without hesitation, he spurred his horse to the battle and 16 German regiments/flags followed him.

This raid was dangerous for Jagiello as it was close to him, and the White Eagle flag could betray him as the King. One knight, Leopold von Kokeritz (or Dypold Kokeritz von Dieper) broke away from his fellows to make a lone attack on Jagiello, probably noticing the flag. Perhaps von Kokeritz recognised Jagiello and rode to attack him. The King was prepared to defend himself. His unarmed secretary, Zbigniew of Oleśnicy managed to trip the German’s horse, threw him down and other knights killed the German.

In the meantime the 16 regiments of Krzyżacy reached the battle to help their pressed fellows who were retreating to join their Grand Master, but Vytautas the Great immediately ordered his troops to surround the Krzyżacy. Many Polish regiments fell to the Krzyżacy now, and the final stages of the deadly battle began. Slowly, the various bands - Lithuanian, Polish, Bohemian, Russian, Tartar, Moravian, Moldavian - closed in upon the Krzyżacy. When the circle was complete, the slaughter began. Lances, daggers, pikes, scythes, poignards, the hoofbeat of horses, the strangling force of maddened hands, all combined to crush the German power which only the day before had seemed so impregnable.

Foot soldiers, mainly villagers, were fighting fanatically, full of hate and revenge, as they had seen their villages destroyed by raiding Krzyżacy, and many of their friends had been killed by them.

The encirclement was complete now. Even the 16 new regiments could not help the situation for the Krzyżacy. Vytautas the Great was dealing out death to every Crusader who opposed him. He was shouting and giving more encouragement to the allies, who were pressing the

unfortunate Krzyżacy more and more. The Krzyżacy with their long swords killed many lightly-armed soldiers, but most of the Krzyżacy were confused now. Those Krzyżacy who wanted to see better threw away their heavy restricting helmets, only to have their heads crushed by the Poles’ numerous weapons.

The Lithuanians were on the left wing attacking the Krzyżacy, and Poles on the right. The circle was so strong that no one could escape from it. The Krzyżacy were fighting bravely and very stubbornly, refusing to accept defeat, and continuing the desperate battle. The Grand Master, aided by Von Wallenrode and six of his bravest knights, tried to hold back the peasants and determined knights. But there were too many of them and he was overcome. The masses fell with extreme force on the German leader, hitting him from all directions. He was fatally injured, and as he perished, he must have known that his crusade to crush the Polish-Lithuanian State and grab Eastern Europe had failed.

In the meantime a brave Pole grabbed the Teutonic Order flag from the hands of Von Wallenrode. Vytautas the Great, who was near the action when the Grand Master was killed, threw up his hands and shouted “Victory!” From his vantage point, Jagiello had a good view, and could see the wild slaughter continue, and could hear some of the Poles and Lithuanians singing. Desperate prayers from the surrounded Krzyżacy could also be heard, asking for help from God. Now that the Grand Master was killed, many lost their nerve and threw their weapons down, looking for a way out, but there was no hope for these unlucky men, who had come from all over Europe to fight the “pagans”.

At twenty past seven, when half an hour of daylight still remained, the last phase of the battle ended with the complete crushing of these 16 regiments, and those who were connected with them. Now the hunt started for those few who had survived and sought help at the Krzyżacy base of tents, where some infantry and a few knights were preparing to help their fellows.

The army of Poles and Lithuanians very quickly overran the Krzyżacy base. Again a new slaughter began, and those who were unarmed and begging for their lives were taken prisoner. Some Krzyżacy, alone or in small groups, tried to escape through the woods, but they lost their way and were captured or killed by the allies.

Only around 1400 Krzyżacy managed to leave the battlefield and reach Malbork. In the base, there was lots of wine, and many handcuffs which had been brought to take the defeated Pagans like dogs back to Malbork. Vytautas ordered everything belonging to the Krzyżacy to be burned, and that the handcuffs should be put on the few prisoners. “Put them on so that they know how it feels to be chained like a dog, to see how poor and useless our countrymen felt, when they were caught as prisoners in their raids on our villages, and taken to these terrible prisons of Malbork”, shouted Vytautas the Great. Jagiello ordered the wine to be poured on to the ground, because he did not want his men drunk, but to have power for the next day, when the flags of the Krzyżacy would fall on the earth, at the feet of the victors. And so the wine combined with the blood on the earth. According to some knights, there was so much blood that it covered all the beautiful green landscape of Grunwald. Over the whole landscape thousands of bodies could be seen lying on the ground, and Priests praying for their souls. It was a sad view for all.

The next day was a big one for the victors. First the King went to see injured men, from both sides. The enemies were no longer handcuffed, because to the victors, these people were human beings and not animals, no matter how they hated them. The knight spirit was full among the brave Lithuanians and Poles.

Soon the two great leaders Vytautas the Great and Jagiello, surrounded by their splendid captains, moved to the battlefield and saw one enemy flag after another fall to the ground. 39 flags would be taken by the Poles, and 10 by the Lithuanians. The lucky 1400 Krzyżacy who escaped only managed to take 7 flags with them, and for them it was a success taking at least these flags.

The Grand Master’s body was there, and Jagiello looked at him saying: “So this is the man who wanted to conquer us and make us slaves of his Order. Let his corpse be covered with purple and buried with honour”.

The body of their greatest hero von Lichtenstein was there, von Wallenrode’s, Schwarzenberger’s, and from the foreign knights was Jaromir of Prague, Gabor of Buda, leader of Hungarians, Richard of York and some others also.

28000 Crusaders and their helpers had been slain the previous day. Of 60 leaders of the Order, more than 50 perished.

It was a complete defeat for the Teutonic Knights, 209 Crusader knights died. Only 12 Polish knights were killed, along with a few other allied knights. Of the Lithuanians and Polish foot soldiers, more than two thirds died, along with over 100 Tartars. The total number of casualties in the Polish-Lithuanian army is unknown, but it is almost certain that over 20,000 died to save their beloved homeland from the barbarian Krzyżacy.

The Tartars, who were relatively few in number, became a scandal, because priest Anton Grabener of Lubeck, who did not participate in the fighting, sent a report to all the capitals of Europe, informing the courts that the Teutonic Knights were defeated only because the pagan Jagiello and his heathen cousin Vytautas, had imported 100.000 Tartars who overwhelmed the defenders of Christianity.

This, of course, was completely untrue. There had only been less than 1500 Tartars present, and they had fled!

But the main powers then, England and France, had problems with each other, and left Poland alone now, made wary by the terrible defeat inflicted on the Krzyżacy. The Pope had not expected that to happen.

On 1 February 1411 a peace treaty was signed by both sides. The Poles and the Lithuanians regained some territory, including Zemaitija, and part of Pomorze (Pomerania), but Malbork remained in German hands. Of course the Teutonic Order would pay money in compensation to the Poles, and all the prisoners would be freed. After this, the weak Teutonic Order would not cause any problems to Poland-Lithuania.

Vytautas the Great would be known in subsequent Lithuanian history as saviour of the nation and Eastern Europe, while in the eyes of Polish historians, Jagiello is regarded in the same way. The Battle of Grunwald is the most important battle in history for both nations. Another determined battle took place in Vienna in 1683 when the Poles managed to save Europe once again when the hussars of Jan Sobieski crushed the Ottomans, but the battle of Grunwald remains the most important for the Poles. In that formidable battle, possibly the most deadly battle that ever happened, Eastern Europe was not Germanised, and Polish and Lithuanian culture advanced in the next centuries.

“Many things have happened over the centuries - battles and meetings - but no one can remember such a terrible crushing defeat. It fell under the eyes of the Great King Jagiello, not only the Teutonic Order but the whole of Germany, whose greatest knights were in the front line of the Teutonic Order, which was more and more entering to the Slavic land...”

HENRYK SIENKEWICZ, “Krzyżacy”

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