



The Battle of Poltava: Birth of the Russian Empire

Peter Englund

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Monday 26 June 1709 was the date of one of the bloodiest and most significant military encounters in European history. The Battle of Poltava marks the end of Sweden's age of greatness, and the beginning of the rise and westward expansion of the vast empire of Russia, affecting the subsequent history of untold millions in Eastern Europe. Across a bleak plain, near an unimportant town in the Russian heartland of the Ukraine, the army of King Charles XII of Sweden, outnumbered four to one, faced that of Czar Peter the Great of Russia. The Swedish command were not unaccustomed to odds of this order: on countless occasions during the previous nine years, in battles raging across Denmark, Germany, Poland and the Baltic States and in Russia itself, they had faced similar or worse odds and invariably emerged victorious. Nor did the exhausted state of their troops, or their inferior firepower and faulty gunpowder, now prevent them from placing their trust in raw courage and cold steel, iron discipline, the inspiring presence of their king, and the benevolent hand of God. On this day however, God ceased to smile on Swedish arms. In a blow-by-blow analytical account of precisely what went wrong, this book brings the horror of 18th-century warfare to life: we smell the battlefield carnage, join the doomed men on their heroic final charge, and feel the agonies of the injured and the dying. A multitude of eye-witness accounts from letters, diaries and memoirs lets us hear the voices of those who were there. The central drama is underpinned by a profound understanding of the economic, political, social and military factors at play. At the end of the battle Czar Peter wrote that "the last stone in the foundations of St Petersburg has now been laid". Meanwhile, a Swedish host of 49,500, which had marched out for Moscow the preceding year, had virtually reduced to a shattered remnant of 1300, who had escaped death or capture by crossing the River Dnieper with their king. And although the indomitable Charles continued to wage the Great Northern War against his increasingly triumphant enemy for another decade, the scars left in the Swedish psyche were such, that in terms of world history, in the author's words, Sweden "left the stage and took a seat among the spectators".

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