



Poltava: The Battle that Changed the World

Three hundred years ago, Russia emerged as a major power after a clash of armies in the Ukraine. Peter the Great's victory, Derek Wilson argues, had repercussions that last to this day.

This year marks the 300th anniversary of a battle fought in hilly terrain near the Ukrainian town of Poltava. In the history of warfare it does not rank as one of the outstanding examples of bravery, great generalship or brilliant tactics. The victors owed their success as much to fortune as to heroism. Daniel Defoe, on receiving the news in England, was scornful. He described the outcome as 'an army of veterans beaten by a mob, a crowd, a mere militia; an army of the bravest fellows in the world, beaten by scoundrels'. Many of his contemporaries shared his surprise and dismay and assumed that this apparent triumph of an uncivilised eastern nation over the best fighting machine in Europe was but a flash in the pan. How wrong they were. The Battle of Poltava was one of the major turning points of modern history and we are still living with its consequences. Peter the Great's victory over Charles XII on June 27th, 1709 signalled the end of Sweden's long period of domination of the Baltic and, more significantly, the emergence of Russia as a major European power.

The two protagonists were remarkable men, very alike in their energy, determination and ruthlessness. Charles XII inherited the crown of Sweden in 1697 at the age of 15. He married the impetuosity of youth with the clear vision and ruthless determination of a more seasoned autocrat. He had received a strict military training and was determined to emulate the feats of his great predecessor Gustav II Vasa, known in Europe as Gustavus Adolphus (he reigned from 1611 to 1632). This Protestant hero of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) had established the greatness of Sweden. He was a military genius and he too had come to the throne while still in his teens (aged 17). Gustavus Adolphus had forced European monarchs to accept this ruler of a remote northern land as an equal and had established the basis of an empire which by 1697 embraced Sweden, Finland, Lapland, Karelia, Ingria, Estonia, Livonia, as well as Western Pomerania and the port of Wismar in the western Baltic and the bishoprics of Bremen and Verden, facing the North Sea. The Baltic had, in effect, become a Swedish lake and Charles's navy was able, very largely, to control the commercial relations of Poland, the north German states and Russia with the outside world.

Peter I became sole ruler of Russia in 1696 at the age of 23 and lost no time in setting about a far-reaching programme of reform that transformed his country by opening it up to western influences. He understood well the importance of international trade and the potential wealth to be gained from the export of flax, hemp, pitch, furs, hides and timber. The problem was that Russia was virtually land-locked. Apart from Archangel on the White Sea, closed by ice for most of the year, the country had no access to the world's shipping lanes. Peter needed a Baltic outlet. With the aid of military and naval experts hired in Holland, England, Scotland and Prussia he created and equipped a new-style army and built a Russian navy from scratch. He was determined to challenge Swedish supremacy. All he needed was the right moment and a credible *cassus belli*.

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The accession of a minor to the Swedish throne seemed to present the ideal opportunity for issuing a challenge. Peter produced two reasons for opening hostilities. Ingria – the northwestern tip of today's Russia on which St Petersburg now stands – had been a bone of contention between the two countries for centuries, having passed back and forth between them. Since 1617 it had been under Swedish dominion and had become a region marked by bitter rivalry between Orthodox residents and Lutheran rulers. Peter's second grievance arose from an incident during his visit in 1697 to Riga on the Baltic coast. He had arrived supposedly incognito and had, not unreasonably, been refused permission by the Swedish governor to make notes on the fortifications of the harbour. He chose to regard this as a snub but it is difficult to believe that the supposed blow to his amour propre was anything other than an excuse. In 1699 Peter allied himself with Sweden's other enemies, Denmark and Saxony, and the following year he declared war. Thus began a conflict which was to last until 1721 and which would come to be known as the Great Northern War.

It took Peter little time to realise that he had gravely misjudged his young opponent. Charles XII rapidly emerged as a charismatic military leader and a born tactician. He loved the campaigning life for its own sake and spent almost his entire reign with his army. A contemporary observer described the king as being 'married to his army' and the metaphor was, in this case, not overblown. The Swedish soldiers were devoted to their king and he turned them into a fighting force without equal. The Duke of Marlborough was among those impressed by the qualities of this young Mars claiming, perhaps with only a touch of flattery, that he would have loved to serve under him in order 'to learn what I yet want to know in the art of war'. Charles quickly disposed of Denmark and turned his attention towards Tsar Peter and his ally Augustus, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. In November 1700 Charles appeared in a snowstorm before the walls of Narva (to the west of today's St Petersburg) and, with fewer than 9,000 men, overwhelmed a defending Russian force of 40,000.

The war might have ended, temporarily at least, at this point. Peter would have been happy with a truce but Charles regarded himself as embarked on a Protestant crusade against a decadent, heretical oriental for whom he had no respect. It was now his turn to misjudge his opponent. Believing that he could polish off the Russians at any time, he turned his attention to Augustus. In the campaigns of 1702 and 1703 he repeatedly defeated the Saxons and then deposed Augustus from the Polish throne in favour of his own puppet king. The Tsar, meanwhile, was displaying his grit and determination in different ways. Charles looked for quick and decisive victories. Peter settled down for the long haul, summed up in his sanguinary observation:

The Swedes will go on beating us for a long time
but eventually they will teach us how to beat them.

While sending contingents to aid Augustus, Peter built up his own military strength. By widespread conscription, the creation of an elite corps of regular soldiers, taxes levied on the monasteries, the employment of western officers to train and lead his troops and the melting of church bells to forge new cannon, he set about overcoming the humiliation of Narva. The Swedish king was about to discover what other would-be conquerors like Napoleon and Hitler would discover after him – that the land and people of Russia constitute a formidable obstacle. Peter had a virtually inexhaustible supply of serfs. The Tsar contemplated with complete sang-froid the sacrifice of unnumbered thousands of his countrymen in the pursuit of ultimate victory. And, if the enemy ventured to invade his territory, Peter had another asset – thousands of square kilometres of inhospitable terrain under snow for several months of the year.



The Tsar concentrated his efforts on his primary objective, access to the Baltic. In the spring of 1703, he deployed a considerable force against the small citadel of Nyenskans at the mouth of the Neva. The overthrow of this insignificant fortress became highly significant in the history of Russia and the world. Not only did Peter clear the Swedes from the extreme eastern end of the Gulf of Finland and set up there his own defence works, he also planted on one of the estuarial islands a new city, his future capital St Petersburg. The following year he decided that he was strong enough to attempt the recapture of Narva. In one of the bloodiest engagements of the war, Peter took the town on August 9th, 1704.

Charles was not perturbed by this reverse. He persisted in his strategy of disabling Russia's ally as a necessary precursor to the final showdown with Peter, which he was still confident of winning. By means of a breathtaking 1,500-kilometre march across Poland and into the very heartland of Saxony he forced the Elector's final surrender. In September he signed a treaty with Augustus by the terms of which the latter was obliged to renounce his alliance with Peter.

Peter was now bereft of allies and once again thought of turning to diplomacy. At this point Charles could have had a reasonably advantageous settlement. The Swedish king was also under pressure from another source. Since 1701, the major European powers had been locked in the debilitating War of the Spanish

Succession. This was now turning against France. Louis XIV was running short of seasoned troops and was in the market for a good mercenary army. By far the best available was that of Sweden whose progress the whole continent had been watching with a mixture of admiration and alarm. Louis offered a deal whereby he would broker a treaty between Russia and Sweden if Charles would place his sword at the disposal of France. The narrow-focussed young king rejected all approaches. He saw no reason to abandon his grand strategy just when it was entering its final and undoubtedly successful phase. Russia was on the ropes. One well-aimed punch would finish it off. He made the fateful decision to re-cross Poland and Lithuania and strike directly at Moscow via Smolensk. His intelligence sources informed him that he would be received by many in Russia as a liberator. Peter's sweeping reforms had caused immense resentment among the leaders of the church and the nobility and Charles envisaged not only defeating the Tsar and rearranging the map of eastern Europe to suit his own purposes, but also deposing Peter and installing a compliant successor.

Charles thought carefully about assembling a sizeable army and ensuring his supply lines. He also struck a deal with Mazeppa, one of the Ukrainian Cossack leaders, who was eager to cast off the Russian yoke. Mazeppa offered to bring in 30,000 of his own followers and to keep the Swedes well supplied from his own rich native grainlands. Despite complaints from his ministers back in Stockholm about the increasing cost of the war and the difficulty of raising taxes, Charles insisted on being provided with fresh troops. By the beginning of the 1708 campaign season he was at Borisov on the Berezina, some 250 kilometres west of Smolensk, with 35,000 men. At Riga, 650 kilometres to the north-west, Count Adam Löwenhaupt was stationed with 12,500 troops. Charles now ordered these troops to be brought to him together with a train of vital supplies. The Russians retreated before the invaders, tempting them to stretch their supply lines. Charles was now wary of this strategy. When he reached Mogilev on the Dneiper a further 150 kilometres on, he stopped to consolidate his forces and await his promised reinforcements. Here he received aggravating news from Löwenhaupt. The general had experienced difficulties commandeering horses and wagons and was unlikely to start out from Riga until the end of July.

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Charles was now presented with a difficult choice. His men were tired from the long march and weakened by scarcity of food. Should he sit it out at Mogilev, wait for Löwenhaupt and then move into secure winter quarters or demand a further effort from his troops by moving them to the Ukraine where they would find supplies as well as Mazeppa's welcome addition to the army? It was an urgent entreaty from the Cossack leader that made up his mind. Having betrayed Peter, Mazeppa was anxious to link up with the Swedes before his treason was discovered. Charles made the fateful decision to march south.

Now, for the first time, Peter began to out-general his adversary. He immediately sent a force to the Ukraine to reassert Russian authority and replace the traitor with a loyal officer. As a result, few of the Ukrainian Cossacks followed Mazeppa to the Swedish camp. The tide of war was beginning to turn against Charles but at least he could comfort himself in early August with the news that Löwenhaupt was finally on the move. However, the lumbering supply train of thousands of wagons was now struggling through a wet Lithuanian autumn. By mid-September it reached Mogilev, long since deserted by Charles's army. It was exposed and offered a tempting target to the Russians. Peter led a force of 14,500 to intercept the supply train at Lesnaya on the Dnieper. The battle raged all day. Löwenhaupt and his soldiers put up a fierce resistance but their position was untenable. Under cover of darkness the general and less than half his army escaped, leaving his precious wagons to be captured by Peter's elated troops.

Charles, deprived of his food supplies and with his army swollen by the addition of the men from Livonia and the Ukraine, commandeered billets in an area east of Kiev around Romny, Priluki and Lochvika and hoped to wait there until the next campaign season. But now he was faced with one of the worst winters in modern European history. The winter of 1708-9 produced record low temperatures and lasted much longer than usual. As hypothermia and famine hit the continent, accompanied by an outbreak of plague, countless people died. Ten thousand Germans fled for refuge to Britain. The Baltic was still frozen in May. Venetians beheld the astonishing spectacle of their lagoon covered by a sheet of ice. Charles's soldiers were reduced to living cringed against walls or in shallow trenches gouged out of the iron earth, striving, often in vain, to stave off frostbite. A Lutheran pastor with the Swedish army was one of those who left a vivid record of the appalling suffering:

We experienced such cold as I shall never forget. The spittle from mouths turned to ice before it reached the ground, sparrows fell frozen from the roofs to the ground. You could see some men without hands, others without hands and feet, others deprived of fingers, face, ears and noses, others crawling like quadrupeds.

By the end of the winter the Swedish army had been reduced almost by half. The climatic conditions were, of course, just as bad for the Russian army and it too suffered losses during that dreadful winter. But the Russian supply lines were intact and they were able to enjoy quarters which, though spartan, were not hemmed in by the enemy. And Peter had the overall advantage that he could always top-up his numbers with new conscripts.



"The defiant Swedes showed to the last what a magnificent army they were"

In April 1709 winter began to loosen its grip on the Ukraine. It was obvious to both sides that the next campaign season would be crucial. Charles's main hope of reinforcements lay in fresh levies raised by his puppet king Stanislaw in Poland. Some of his officers urged him to withdraw westwards to link up with the expected new contingents but 'retreat' was not a word in the Swedish king's vocabulary. He decided instead to establish control of the main road running eastwards from Kiev to Kharkov, the best route from

Poland, so as to secure his supply line. With this in view he brought his army up to the small fortified town of Poltava situated at the point where the Kharkov road crossed the river Vorskla. It was on a wooded ridge and garrisoned by 4,000 Russians well provided with artillery. For the siege to be successful it needed to be over quickly before the main Russian army arrived. However, the bombardment which began on May 1st was still in progress on June 15th despite the fact that the Russians were by then so short of ammunition that they were firing any missiles that came to hand. Charles was even hit by a dead cat hurled from a Russian cannon. By this time the entire Russian army, some 40,000 strong, had assembled on the eastern side of the Vorskla, north of Poltava. From this position Peter, still hesitant about facing the formidable Swedes in open battle, contented himself with harassing jabs at small units of the enemy. He may have hoped that news just arrived from Poland might oblige the Swedes to withdraw. King Stanislaw, concerned about his own insecure position, had sent messengers to inform Charles that he could not spare any troops to aid his ally. True to form, Charles decided that the best form of defence was attack. He would force the reluctant Tsar to face him in open combat.

Peter's first objective was to bring his army across the river. To divert the enemy he sent a detachment of cavalry to make a feint across the Vorskla south of Poltava. Charles rode out from his camp to see what the enemy was up to. There then occurred one of those chance minor events that sometimes decide the fate of nations. A musketball struck the king in the left foot and opened up a long gash which immediately began to bleed profusely. He refused to have it tended and only when he was on the point of toppling from his horse was he carried half-conscious to the surgeon's station. It was June 17th, Charles's 27th birthday; it was not a good omen.

For three days, while the Swedish king lay in a fever, his generals, paralysed by their unwillingness to take any initiative, did nothing. Peter set up a forward camp with hastily constructed timber walls and outworks, or redoubts, extending into the plain. To the rear, the camp was protected by the river and marshy ground. This was essentially a defensive position. Peter was challenging his adversary either to attack or abandon the invasion. On paper everything was in his favour. The Russians outnumbered the enemy two to one. They had chosen the site for the battle. The Swedes were weakened by the privations of the winter and were desperately short of food. They were going into battle without their supreme commander. Above all, the Russian army was very different from the one that had been defeated at Narva eight and a half years earlier. Improved training and equipment together with experience in the field had transformed Peter's peasant levies into a credible fighting machine.

Charles ordered a pre-dawn, all-out attack. His cavalry would smash through the redoubts opening the way for the infantry to scale the Russians' wooden walls and engage them in hand-to-hand fighting. Long before first light his foot soldiers were in position. But the cavalry took too long to prepare. Only around 4am, when the sun began sharply to outline the eastern ridge, were generals Rehnskjöld and Löwenhaupt ready with their mounted troops.

Peter, meanwhile, had used the hours of darkness to strengthen his position. He had sent men out in front of the camp to construct yet more redoubts. These were not finished before daylight but they did present the attackers with a further line of obstacles. At the same time the Tsar had his entire army ready and at their posts well before dawn. Having lost the element of surprise, Charles threw his infantry against the redoubts to clear a path for the cavalry. Despite murderous fire from 70 cannon positioned defending the centre, some were quickly successful. But others became bogged down in hand-to-hand fighting. The centre ground became a heaving melee but on the

Russian right things appeared to be going better for the attackers. Peter's cavalry commander called on him to release the main army still held in reserve but from his vantage point Peter could see the Swedes were losing men fast. Time was on his side. He would wait.

The well-disciplined Swedish army, despite its rapidly thinning ranks, was sticking heroically to its task. The problem was that it was too divided to be effective. The Swedes urgently needed to regroup. Charles sent messages to Löwenhaupt on the right and Major General Roos commanding the centre to break off their engagements and reassemble in the open field. It was now almost seven o'clock. It took two more hours for Löwenhaupt to extricate his battalions and march them to the rendezvous point. Roos's men never made it. Watching from the camp wall, Peter saw them struggling to disengage and sent fresh troops against the Swedes. In the hot engagement which followed all but 400 of Roos's men were killed or wounded.

Charles now had no option but to retreat. This was the moment Peter had been waiting for. Now he would give the Swedish king his open battle but on his own terms. He threw down the camp walls and emerged with 30,000 troops who were still fresh. They formed up in battle line, infantry in the centre, cavalry on the wings, artillery to the rear firing over their heads. It was now mid-morning and the Swedish army had already been devastated. Yet astonishingly the issue was still undecided. The defiant Swedes showed to the last what a magnificent army they were. The blue-coated troops marched steadily forward only to be cut down by an unremitting hail of cannon balls and grapeshot. Almost miraculously the Swedish right wing reached the Russian lines. Elsewhere it was a different story. To the left the infantry had been halted by the devastating artillery barrage. Peter now ordered a counter-charge, splitting the Swedish line in two. The enemy infantry at last began to throw down their arms and flee the field. Yet still the day was not won. Swedish cavalry tried to turn the tide of battle with an attack on the Russian left. With calm discipline Peter's officers called the infantry and field artillery into a square formation. Against this human rock the waves of Swedish horsemen thundered in vain.

By midday it was all over. The shreds of Charles's army were hurrying southwards. The king himself only narrowly avoided capture; his litter was smashed by a cannon ball and several of his bearers were killed. His personal guard was decimated. Only when some of the cavalry got him onto a horse and escorted him from the field was he able to escape to seek refuge in Turkish territory. He left behind almost 7,000 dead and wounded and 2,760 prisoners. Russian losses amounted to 4,500 dead and wounded.

All Europe was stunned by the news from Poltava. The statesmen knew that a major player had entered their game. It was still several years before Sweden was forced to admit defeat but its empire was crumbling. As the European map was redrawn, kings and princes scrambled to grab territory. One man commanded a foremost position in the negotiations – Tsar Peter of Russia. And that is a position that Peter's heirs, whether royal or presidential, have enjoyed ever since.

- **Derek Wilson is the author of Peter the Great, published this month by Hutchinson. It is part of a series exploring the meaning of 'Europe'.**

Further Reading

Peter Englund, *The Battle of Poltava: The Birth of the Russian Empire* (Gollancz, 1992); David Kirby, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period: The Baltic World 1492-1772* (Longman, 1990); Robert Frost, *The Northern Wars 1558-1721* (Longman, 2000); I.R. Lewitter, 'Russia, Poland and the Baltic, 1697-1721', *Historical Journal* 2 (1968); Lindsay Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (Yale, 1998); Voltaire, *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (The Folio Society, 1976); Voltaire, *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* (Kessinger, 2007).