

The Battle of Warsaw

21 July 1705

by

Oskar Sjöström

© 2004 Oskar Sjöström

(Translated by Dan Schorr)

Translated and Published with permission of the author.

This translation is intended for private use.

No publication or sale is permitted

(Translation © 2006 Dan Schorr)

A decisive moment

The Swedish Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Karl Nieroth, stood arranged in the broiling heat outside the walls of Warsaw. It consisted of only three cavalry regiments, the Östgöta, Smålands and Uppland tremännings, not more than 2,000 men all in all. Deployed with them were also 60 men from the Skaraborg Infantry Regiment who by chance had been nearby when the alarm of the enemy's approach was sounded.

On the surrounding fields, where grain stood high, townspeople had gathered in order to observe the upcoming battle and certainly hoped for some good entertainment. Polish nobles who had embraced the Swedish cause had been seen fleeing from the capital in panic, afraid of being captured by the Saxons. Others had stayed for the sake of pride or in defiant indifference of their destiny following a Swedish defeat. One of those, the Polish Confederation Marshal, Petrus Jacobus von Paradis Bronicz, had followed Nieroth to battle eager to swing his sword for the Swedes.

It was a decisive moment. If the Swedes lost the day, Warsaw would be occupied by the Saxons, and the fragile negotiations for peace and allegiance between the Swedes and Poles which were in progress there would be ruined. King Stanislav's regime threatened to be so weakened that his coronation, an event soon to take place, would be postponed or even cancelled. Even worse, for the Swedes, all the hard-bought support that they had actually been able to summon from the Polish nobles for their vassal king would be decimated or scattered totally.

The price of Warsaw

Along the road from Blonie in the west, the Saxon-Polish army marched to the battlefield. It was an army numbering almost five times the Swedish force and was commanded by the Saxon Lieutenant general Otto Arnold Paykull. It turned south at Wola, one of Warsaw's suburbs, and arranged in a compact line of battle all along the road from Rakowicz to Warsaw. Great clouds of dust drifted towards the Swedish lines and limited the vision, but they could still grasp the extent of the Saxon-Polish army which outflanked them considerably, and in addition measured three lines deep. The Swedes knew that defeat would be a veritable catastrophe.

The Saxons, on the other hand, had a great price to win. Not only would Warsaw, the centre of Swedish support in Poland, fall in their hands. With the city the entire Swedish friendly Confederation and Stanislav's regime would fall, signaling the immense collapse of the Swedish war effort. That Warsaw at the moment was defended by only three cavalry regiments had enticed Paykull the promise of success. He had a large cavalry army under his command: 3,500 Saxon cuirassiers and some 6,000 Polish horsemen (led by not less than six noble marshals!).

The great consequences of an eventual Swedish defeat

Nieroth could not count on any reinforcements. The Swedish Royal Army was still in quarters in Rawicz, and Charles XII had shown an unusual lack of interest in campaigning this summer, possibly occupied with all of the diplomatic events that were occurring in his headquarters. Poland was not the only nation with which Sweden negotiated. The Polish question had become an issue of great international concern since the Great Northern War, in the mind of every European diplomat, risked to overlap with the ongoing War of Spanish succession. August's dethronement, the foremost Swedish war aim, had faced strong negative reactions throughout the whole continent. Harsh criticism was heard not only from patriotic Polish magnates, burning with sudden passion for matters of independence and constitutional questions, but also from potentates such as the Kaiser and Pope.

The French had made clear that they would only support Stanislav's regime if Charles XII was willing to make a service in return, namely to move the war from Poland into Saxony, thereby easing the French military efforts in Germany. That scenario naturally frightened the coalition against Louis XIV since they all but wanted to see the successful Swedish armies come marching westward. Warsaw's fate was, therefore, an important cog in a great cosmopolitan power play, and there were many who followed the events with interest. It was possible that Charles XII had committed a major error by not strengthening Warsaw's defenses with more troops. The further advancement of Swedish politics, perhaps even the chances for success in general, now depended on the two thousand swords in Nieroths army.

Events preceding the battle

The news of Paykull's imminent advance on Warsaw reached Nieroth's headquarters on the 18th July. However, nobody knew from what direction he could be expected to attack. A drought had dried out the Vistula River, Warsaw's foremost defensive line, and as a consequence had made several crossing points possible for the fast-moving Saxon-Polish army. With the mobility of his force, Paykull could and was expected to maneuver quickly and show up unexpectedly from either north or south. Nieroth therefore immediately ordered two reconnaissance parties of 180 men each in order to prevent any unpleasant surprise-attack. One of the detachments, led by Lieutenant Colonel Jon Stålhammar, was commanded north. The other, under the resolute command of Lieutenant Colonel Klas Bonde, headed south.

Bonde was 39 years old and had been a soldier since 1687. He had served Swedish as well as foreign flags throughout his dramatic career. He had found his proper element during the Polish War and won respect and approval among fellow generals. He was reckoned as a trustworthy and independent officer and had thus often been used in reconnaissance roles. Since he was always notorious in all his duties, especially in his forceful collecting of contributions for the Swedish army, his name had become infamous among the Poles.

Bonde's detachment had hastened to a stream located near Zakoczyn, some thirty kilometers south of the Polish capital. For him, missions like this one had become routine. As a probable result of this fact he wasn't as careful as he should have been when he reached the ford. Riding ahead of his detachment with only 20 men, Bonde at dusk on 20th July stumbled right into Paykull's avant-garde just as they were practicing themselves over the Vistula. The sudden and unexpected encounter left Bonde with no other choice than to charge the enemy, which probably consisted of 500 men, in an effort to delay the enemy at the crossing long enough to be reinforced by the rest of his detachment. The odds were tremendously poor: for every Swede there were twenty Poles, and the whole party immediately was cut to pieces.

Soon afterwards, the remaining 160 cavalymen from Bonde's unit arrived. The enemy troops, however, had now increased considerably. Certain sources mention that 5,000 men had already managed to cross. The Swedes did not for a moment hesitate to repeat the recently committed foolhardiness of Bonde. They attacked with sword in hand into the midst of the enemy's multitude and were soon massacred in the same stylish fashion as their former commander. A sufficient number, however, succeeded in fighting their way through and hastened back north to Warsaw in order to alarm the Swedish defenders of the upcoming arrival of Paykull's Army from the south. Nieroth found that he could do nothing else other than rallying as many soldiers as he could and engage the enemy on the open field.

The battle begins

On 21st July the two armies at last faced each other outside the walls of Warsaw. Nieroth had decided to attack. In doing so, he risked every man's life in his small and numerically inferior army. The charge could develop into a larger version of Bonde's brave but fateful attack the evening before. Since the Saxon army outflanked the Swedish line, Nieroth was forced to divide his line into two separate wings which were to operate without a center. This gap was the Swede's weak spot. Through the gap between the wings, the enemy could concentrate its strength in order to attack them both in the flanks and from the rear. This was a terrifying scenario for any commander in an époque which had been used to resolve combat front against front.

On the right, Nieroth commanded his regiment, Smålands, together with the Uppland tremännings. On the left, Jacob Burenskiöld led the Östgöta regiment. Somewhere furthest out towards the right, concealed in the high grain, the 60 men on foot from the Skaraborg's Regiment deployed ready with their muskets. The Swedish line moved forward in the fluttering grain, creating great clouds of dust. It was around 8:00 in the

morning and the time had come for the soldiers to earn their small pay and fulfill their sworn duty to king and fatherland.

Paykull, watching the blue lines of the Swedish army advance towards him, was much pleased with the success against Bonde's party the preceding day. With that event in mind he and his men were certain of victory. The thin line of Swedes remaining shouldn't be an obstacle for his great price: Warsaw and the imminent fall of the Swedish friendly Confederation. There were only a handful of Swedish cavalry standards between him and all the glory that loomed beyond the city walls.

Bonde had however, before being cut from his saddle, taught Paykull and his mounted horde that nothing would be won against the Swedes without a hard fight. It could not have been without wonder and respect that Paykull's men now rode to meet "this remarkable kind of enemy, who with unmatched self-reliance was prepared to go straight at any superior force, fighting as long as they were able and clearly finding it natural to die, even mounted, than to turn one's back to the enemy" (Frans G. Bengtsson).

Swedish cavalry tactics

It was usual among European heavy cavalry to ride to the attack with cold steel at great speed. An assaulting squadron acted like a battering ram that crashed into the enemy's line, usually at the weakest point, and caused disorder and flight. But nowhere had this battle tactic been developed to such perfection as in Sweden. Cavalry was conventionally viewed as the prolonged arms of an army, its main role being the harassment of enemy flanks, meeting with the opponents cavalry or mopping up fleeing infantry. In the Swedish army, the cavalry was instead used as the key instrument of victory and it was from the cavalry that the hardest hammer blow would strike.

This had resulted in the Swedish cavalry fighting with a finesse and speed that was unique in Europe. The cavalryman was strictly drilled – training was an enormously important part of everyday life for all Swedish riders – and usually functioned tremendously well in a collected troop. The squadrons attacked with closed lines, the men riding knee behind knee, with immense speed – always at the edge of what was possible before the formation was completely splintered by its own speed and weight. The Swedish squadron was therefore, if it could operate under the right circumstances, a terrible war machine, far more effective and deadlier than the loose squadrons that the Saxons and Poles chose to fight with.

The Swedes charge

At high speed the Swedes rode straight at the enemy and where met by rolling salvos. They then crashed in. The shock was severe: the Smålands Cavalry Regiment succeeded, in its first attack, to rout 3,000 Lithuanian horsemen and pursued them for a good twenty kilometers in steady fighting. The other units also achieved initial advantages but soon hit stubborn resistance. Paykull naturally used the gap between the Swede's flanks in order to attack them in the flank and rear. Six Saxon squadrons passed through, swung to the left and struck the Upplands tremännings Regiment in the flank as they were advancing, causing disorder. The Östgöta cavalry, farthest out on the left, met the core of Paykull's

troops, almost 3,000 Saxons, who resisted the first Swedish shock and then defended themselves so long that the Poles in great numbers attacked the Östgöta regiment in the flank and rear with “attack on attack”.

Burenskiöld's Östgöta Cavalry, however, attacked with such frenzy that the Saxons in the front could not hold their ground against them. They turned and fled and the Swedes pursued them, totally “unconcerned of the attack that the Polish cavalry directed at their flank and rear”. The Saxons quickly stopped and reformed for battle again, and after a short pause Burenskiöld returned to the attack against them, now supported by a few squadrons of the Upplands tremänning regiment which had succeeded in throwing back the Saxons who had hit them in the flank. The fighting became severe again and the Östgöta Cavalry lost many of its men. However, finally the sixty men of the Skaraborgs infantry came to their assistance, who, “stood in thick rye, all in a line and with only their heads showing, giving their salvos”.

The battle ends

Nieroth was able to hurry back to the battlefield with the Smålands cavalry following his first advance, but the battle was already over – the furious fighting had gone on for six hours – and the only thing left to charge was some Polish squadrons that had moved behind the Swedish battle line in the hope of finding something to loot. Jon Stålhammar, who the day before had been reconnoitering north of the city with a detachment like the one Bonde had died at the head of, attacked them sword in hand and they fled towards the Vistula in order to save themselves over “and I observed 300 Polish men out in the river...and no person came out”. Stålhammar had not been involved in any great battle before this day, and he wrote, obviously affected by the events, home to his wife Sofia Drake that “God is my witness: I was surrounded many times that day, but God helped me”.

The battle was over. On the field lay hundreds of dead and wounded: around 150 Swedes had died and an equal number were wounded. Probably 500 Saxons and Poles died and around twice as many were wounded (the exact number was always difficult to count at this time, but this battle was more difficult than usual since the high grain in the fields hid so many bodies). It had been a necessary victory for the Swedish war aims, however abstract that might have been for the average Swedish soldier. Thanks to Nieroth and his men, Charles XII perhaps avoided what could have been an enormous deathblow to his dethronement policy.

Paykull to trial

The battle also resulted in a notable juridical epilogue. In the midst of the battle, Paykull was taken prisoner as “he fell down into a ditch” at the same moment the Östgöta Cavalry and the Saxons crashed into each other for the second time. He was originally from Swedish Livonia therefore counted as a traitor – an offense that was only punished by death at this time. Paykull, however, had been careful to break all ties to Sweden and he hadn't any property in Livonia. In practice, he wasn't Swedish at all. But formalities prevailed and Paykull was shipped to Stockholm where he after a short period was executed. He had tried to the last avoiding this bitter fate and he had promised to reveal

all the secret knowledge he had in alchemy. The mighty Urban Hjärne himself appealed in a letter to Charles XII for pardon for this talented man who obviously could be of great help in improving the failing Swedish state finances. But the King refused to listen and allowed the death sentence to be carried out “notwithstanding what he [Paykull] promised to do in the art of chemistry”.

Sources

- Adlerfelt, G. [utg. S. E. Bring], *Karl XII:s krigsföretag 1700-1706*, Sthlm 1919
- Asker, B., ”Carl Nieroth”, i *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bd XXVI, Sthlm 1989
- Backman, S., *Från Rawicz till Fraustadt. Studier i det stora nordiska krigets diplomati 1704-1706*, Lund 1940
- Bengtsson, F. G., *Karl XII:s levnad*, Bd I. Till uttåget ur Sachsen, Sthlm 1935
- Bensow, E., *Kungl. Skaraborgs regementes historia*, Bd II. Från Breitenfeld till Fredrikshald 1631-1718, Göteborg 1944
- Björck, E. [utg. A. Quennerstedt], ”Rustmästare Björcks anteckningar 1701-1719”, i *Karolinska krigares dagböcker jämte andra samtida skrifter*, Bd III, Lund 1907
- Grimberg, C. & Uddgren, H. E., *Svenska krigarbragder*, Sthlm 1914
- Haintz, O., *König Karl XII. von Schweden*, Bd I. Der Kampf Schwedens um die Vormacht in Nord- und Osteuropa 1697-1709 (1936), Berlin 1958
- Lewenhaupt, A., *Karl XII:s officerare. Biografiska anteckningar*, Bd I-II, Sthlm 1921
- Rosén, J., *Det karolinska skedet. Karl XI:s och Karl XII:s tid*, Lund 1963
- Stålhammar, J. [utg. A. Quennerstedt], ”Öfverstelöjtnanten vid Smålands kavalleri Jon Stålhammars bref till sin fru Sofia Drake 1700-1708”, i *Karolinska krigares dagböcker jämte andra samtida skrifter*, Bd VII, Lund 1912
- Uddgren, H. E., ”Jacob Burenskiöld”, i *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bd VI, Sthlm 1926

Orders of Battle

Saxon-Polish-Lithuanian Army

Saxons

1st line (right to left)

Garde du Corps	500
Leibregiment Cuirassier	250
Steinau's Cuirassier	250
Gersdorff's Cuirassier	250
Milchau's Dragoons	250
Leibregiment Dragoons	250

2nd line (left to right)

Brause's Dragoons	240
Königin Cuirassier	240
Kurprinz Cuirassier	240
Steinau's Cuirassier	240
Goltz' Dragoons	240
Schulenburg's Dragoons	240

Reserve

Eichstädt's Cuirassier	225
Commanded Cuirassier	200

Polish-Lithuanian

Left Wing(Lithuanians)

25 Banners (companies) each of 65
25 Banners (companies) each of 65

Right Wing (Poles)

20 Banners (companies) each of 65
20 Banners (companies) each of 65

Swedish Army

Östgöta Cavalry Regiment	800
Upplands tremännings Cavalry Regiment (Kruse's)	400
Smålands Cavalry Regiment	740
Skaraborgs Infantry Regiment	60

The Battle of Warsaw

21 July 1705

from
Theatrum Europaeum Vol. 17
(Published 1720)

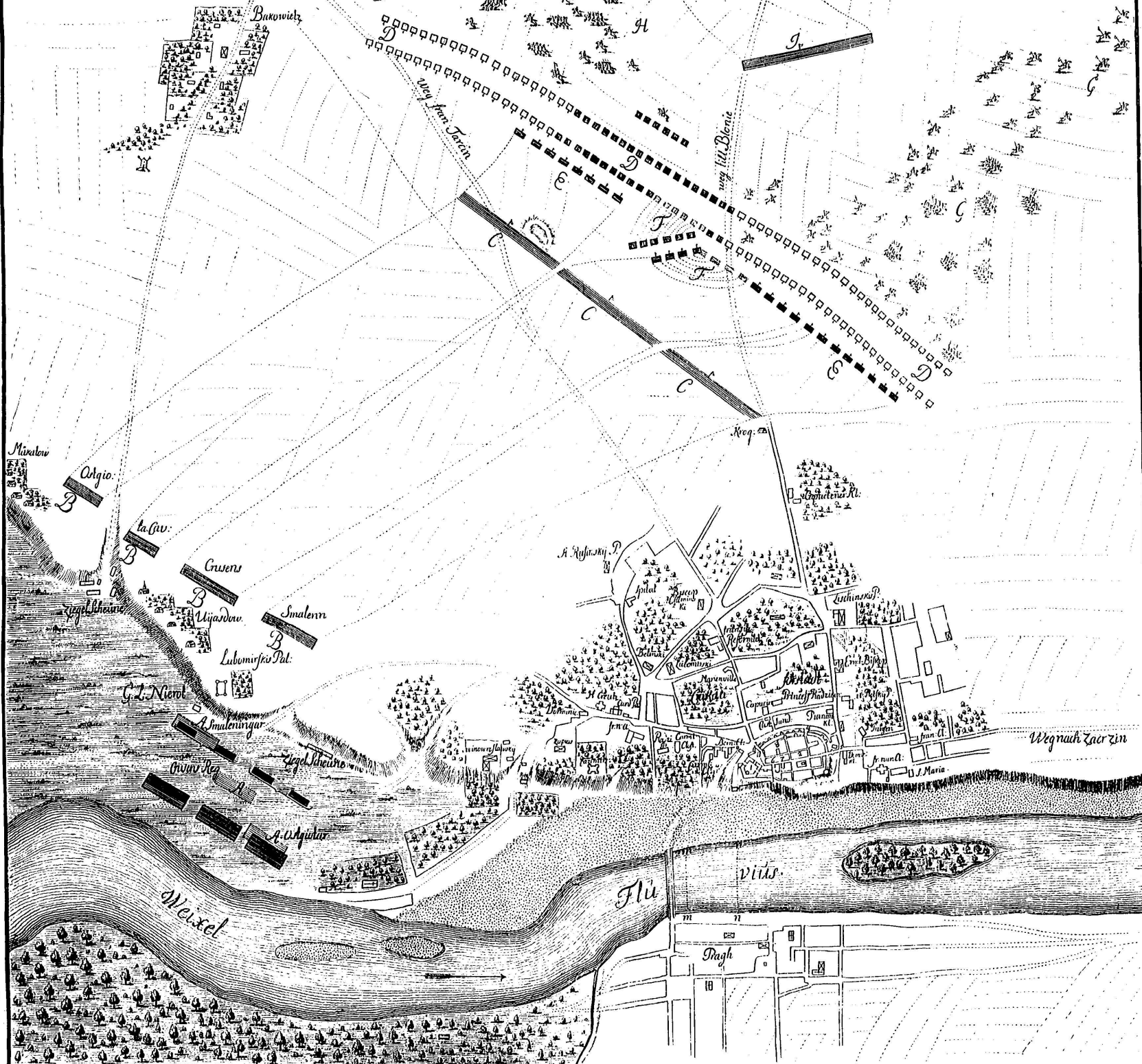
Delineation von der Action, welche zwischen denen Schweden, und Sachsen, nebst denen Pohlen, vorgegangen bey Warschau, den 21 Julij 1705.

Explication.

A. Campement an der Weixel, alwo der Gen. leut. Nieroth, mit 3 Regimenten Cavall. stand, ehe er vernommen, d. der feind über der Weixel gekommen. B. der Schweden lager, d. 20 Fuß den machten, auf der Höhe genommen. C. der Schwedenmarch. E. der Schweden Ordre de Bataille, welche sich genütiget funde, eine separation zu machen, weilten der feind ihnen auf beiden Seiten über flugelle, das also der Gen. leut. und obrist Kruse sich zur rechten zög, worauf die attaque von beiden seiten an, Ang. D. der Sachsen ordre de Bataille, bestand in 4000 Sachsen und 6000 Pohlen. F. der Sächs. Gen. leut. Pauckel, wollte von der gaden offnung profitiren, und lief. G. Equad. den obrist Krus, im rücken und in der flang fallen, wo durch ein theil von dem Regiment etwas litle. H. der feindes rechter flugell in die flucht geschlagen. I. dessen linker flugell in die flucht geschlagen und verfolgt. J. wolgohles Regiment welches den feind fern nach setzet, und nachdem einige equadr. von obrist Krusens Regiment sich realligiret, stiegen sie an die colgohlen, und als der feind

* Sich hinter dem dorff Wola, wieder gesetz hatte, attackirte der Gen. leut. Nieroth, dem feind aufs neuwe. bei K. also der Sächs. Gen. leut. Pauckel, gefangen ward, die Sachsen wurden wieder in die flucht geschlagen, und nahmen ein jeder sein weg ab gühlets er konte. L. sind so mancher welche gefolget und an die Ey. angothen anstiegen, und auf der feindes rechter flugell feuerten, welcher den Schweden in den rücken fallen wolt, ward aber repoussirt und gleich denen andern in die flucht getrieben. Nach dem diese action vorbei, vernahm der Gen. leut. das einige Polacken bei warschau als bei N. unter der weixel gesetz, und in der vorschadt geplündert, also lief. Er selbstige wieder weg jagen und bei N. in den Trohm treten, und nahm daruff sein voriges lager bei B. N. die Sachsen sind ohne standarten gezeichnet, dan sie hatten selbige auff jenseit der weixel zurück gelassen.

Explication der Ziesern
1. das Schloss. 2. warschau. 3. Gracausch thor
4. mittel thor. 5. Neustadt thor. 6. cathedral kirche
7. schulter kirche. 8. martianer kirche.



20 fahnen Polacken jede à 65 man	25 fahnen Polack à 65 man
20 fahnen Polack à 65 Mann	25 fahnen Polack à 65 man
Marchalk Comenoffskij.	Referendar Rusatzkij.
March. Dehnoff.	
Pohlantetz.	
Gen. leut. Pauckel.	Gen. Maj. Schulenburg.
Sächsische Ordre de Bataille.	
Obrister Burenschild.	Obrister Kruse.
Gen. leut. Nieroth.	Capit. Kofle.
Ungohles Cavall. 800 man.	Swedische Ordre de Bataille
Krusens Cavall. 400 man.	Gen. leut. Nieroth.
Smolands Cavall. 740 man	