

PETER H. WILSON

— GREAT BATTLES —

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For Margaret Micrander

FOREWORD

For those who practise war in the twenty-first century the idea of a 'great battle' can seem no more than the echo of a remote past. The names on regimental colours or the events commemorated at mess dinners bear little relationship to patrolling in dusty villages or waging 'wars amongst the people'. Contemporary military doctrine downplays the idea of victory, arguing that wars end by negotiation not by the smashing of an enemy army or navy. Indeed it erodes the very division between war and peace, and with it the aspiration to fight a culminating 'great battle'.

And yet to take battle out of war is to redefine war, possibly to the point where some would argue that it ceases to be war. Carl von Clausewitz, who experienced two 'great battles' at first hand—Jena in 1806 and Borodino in 1812—wrote in *On War* that major battle is 'concentrated war', and 'the centre of gravity of the entire campaign'. Clausewitz's remarks related to the theory of strategy. He recognized that in practice armies might avoid battles, but even then the efficacy of their actions relied on the latent threat of fighting. Winston Churchill saw the importance of battles in different terms, not for their place within war but for their impact on historical and national narratives. His forebear, the Duke of Marlborough, commanded in four major battles and named his palace after the most famous of them, Blenheim, fought in 1704. Battles, Churchill wrote in his biography of Marlborough, are 'the principal milestones in secular history'. For him 'Great battles, won or lost, change the entire course of events, create new standards of values, new moods, new atmospheres, in armies and nations, to which all must conform'.

Clausewitz's experience of war was shaped by Napoleon. Like Marlborough, the French emperor sought to bring his enemies to battle. However, each lived within a century of the other, and they fought their wars in the same continent and even on occasion on adjacent ground. Winston Churchill's own experience of war, which spanned the late nineteenth-century colonial conflicts of the British Empire as well as two world wars, became increasingly distanced from the sorts of battle he and Clausewitz described. In 1898 Churchill rode in a cavalry charge in a battle which crushed the Madhist forces of the Sudan in a single day. Four years later the British commander at Omdurman, Lord Kitchener, brought the South African War to a conclusion after a two-year guerrilla conflict in which no climactic battle occurred. Both Churchill and Kitchener served as British cabinet ministers in the First World War, a conflict in which battles lasted weeks, and even months, and which, despite their scale and duration, did not produce clear-cut outcomes. The 'Battle' of Verdun ran for all but one month of 1916 and that of the Somme for five months. The potentially decisive naval action at Jutland spanned a more traditional twenty-four-hour timetable but was not conclusive and was not replicated during the war. In the Second World War, the major struggle in waters adjacent to Europe, the 'Battle' of the Atlantic, was fought from 1940 to early 1944.

Clausewitz would have called these twentieth-century 'battles' campaigns, or even seen them as wars in their own right. The determination to seek battle and to venerate its effects may therefore be culturally determined, the product of time and place, rather than an inherent attribute of war. The ancient historian Victor Davis Hanson has argued that seeking battle is a 'western way of war' derived from classical Greece. Seemingly supportive of his argument are the writings of Sun Tzu, who flourished in warring states in China between two and five centuries before the birth of Christ, and who pointed out that the most effective way of waging war was to avoid the risks and dangers of actual fighting. Hanson has provoked strong criticism: those who argue that wars can be won without battles are not only to be

found in Asia. Eighteenth-century European commanders, deploying armies in close-order formations in order to deliver concentrated fires, realized that the destructive consequences of battle for their own troops could be self-defeating. After the First World War, Basil Liddell Hart developed a theory of strategy which he called 'the indirect approach', and suggested that manoeuvre might substitute for hard fighting, even if its success still relied on the inherent threat of battle.

The winners of battles have been celebrated as heroes, and nations have used their triumphs to establish their founding myths. It is precisely for these reasons that their legacies have outlived their direct political consequences. Commemorated in painting, verse, and music, marked by monumental memorials, and used as the way points for the periodization of history, they have enjoyed cultural afterlives. These are evident in many capitals, in place names and statues, not least in Paris and London. The French tourist who finds himself in a London taxi travelling from Trafalgar Square to Waterloo Station should reflect on his or her own domestic peregrinations from the Rue de Rivoli to the Gare d'Austerlitz. Today's Mongolia venerates the memory of Genghis Khan while Greece and Macedonia scrap over the rights to Alexander the Great.

This series of books on 'great battles' tips its hat to both Clausewitz and Churchill. Each of its volumes situates the battle which it discusses in the context of the war in which it occurred, but each then goes on to discuss its legacy, its historical interpretation and reinterpretation, its place in national memory and commemoration, and its manifestations in art and culture. These are not easy books to write. The victors were more often celebrated than the defeated; the effect of loss on the battlefield could be cultural oblivion. However, that point is not universally true: the British have done more over time to mark their defeats at Gallipoli in 1915 and Dunkirk in 1940 than their conquerors on both occasions. For the history of war to thrive and be productive it needs to embrace the view from 'the other side of the hill', to use the Duke of Wellington's words. The battle the British call Omdurman is for the Sudanese the battle of Kerreri; the Germans called Waterloo 'la

Belle Alliance' and Jutland Skagerrak. Indeed the naming of battles could itself be a sign not only of geographical precision or imprecision (Kerreri is more accurate but as a hill rather than a town is harder to find on a small-scale map), but also of cultural choice. In 1914 the German general staff opted to name their defeat of the Russians in East Prussia not Allenstein (as geography suggested) but Tannenberg, in order to claim revenge for the defeat of the Teutonic Knights in 1410.

Military history, more than many other forms of history, is bound up with national stories. All too frequently it fails to be comparative, to recognize that war is a 'clash of wills' (to quote Clausewitz once more), and so omits to address both parties to the fight. Cultural difference and, even more, linguistic ignorance can prevent the historian considering a battle in the round; so too can the availability of sources. Levels of literacy matter here, but so does cultural survival. Often these pressures can be congruent but they can also be divergent. Britain enjoys much higher levels of literacy than Afghanistan, but in 2002 the memory of the two countries' three wars flourished in the latter, thanks to an oral tradition, much more robustly than in the former, for whom literacy had created distance. And the historian who addresses cultural legacy is likely to face a much more challenging task the further in the past the battle occurred. The opportunity for invention and reinvention is simply greater the longer the lapse of time since the key event.

All historians of war must, nonetheless, never forget that, however rich and splendid the cultural legacy of a great battle, it was won and lost by fighting, by killing and being killed. The battle of Waterloo has left as abundant a footprint as any, but the general who harvested most of its glory reflected on it in terms which have general applicability, and carry across time in their capacity to capture a universal truth. Wellington wrote to Lady Shelley in its immediate aftermath: 'I hope to God I have fought my last battle. It is a bad thing to be always fighting. While in the thick of it I am much too occupied to feel anything; but it is wretched just after. It is quite impossible to think of glory. Both mind and feelings are exhausted. I am wretched even at the

FOREWORD

moment of victory, and I always say that, next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained.' Readers of this series should never forget the immediate suffering caused by battle, as well as the courage required to engage in it: the physical courage of the soldier, sailor, or warrior, and the moral courage of the commander, ready to hazard all on its uncertain outcomes.

HEW STRACHAN

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ABBREVIATIONS

BA	H. Hallwich (ed.), <i>Briefe und Akten zur Geschichte Wallensteins</i> (1630–4) (4 vols, Vienna, 1912)
Col.	Colonel
GAV	Gustav-Adolf-Verein
HA	Hatzfeldt-Wildenberg Archive, Schloss Schönstein
Lt.Col.	Lieutenant Colonel
Maj.Gen.	Major General
SAL	Stadt Archiv Lützen

Introduction

The battle of Lützen between the imperial and Swedish armies was fought about 19 km southwest of Leipzig in Saxony, Germany, on Tuesday 16 November 1632. It was neither the largest nor the bloodiest battle of the Thirty Years War (1618–48), Europe's most destructive conflict prior to the twentieth-century world wars, but it is certainly the best remembered today. This book addresses why that is the case and, in doing so, seeks to reconstruct the battle as far as is possible, to locate it within its wider historical context, and to explore its place in military history, together with its cultural and political legacy.

The picture that will emerge departs in several ways from the received image of both Lützen and the Thirty Years War. The human past is complex, and ambiguous stories are hard to remember. It is both more convenient and often more expedient for subsequent generations to fashion simpler narratives more in tune with their current concerns, than to remember and accept uncomfortable truths. Those viewing events from a distance, such as English speakers watching the Thirty Years War rage across Europe, may see things more clearly than the participants, but also may have less desire to engage with complexities which do not concern them or their descendants so directly. Simplified narratives often begin as genuine attempts at concise and lucid explanations, but can become increasingly detached from actual evidence as they get subsumed within stories of other developments, such as the emergence of Europe's sovereign state system.

The Thirty Years War has been remembered primarily as a bloody religious war which began in the Holy Roman Empire before allegedly

spiralling out of control and engulfing most of Europe. Supposedly, it finally burnt itself out through mutual exhaustion, paving the way for the Peace of Westphalia which is widely regarded as the birth of a new secular international order. English-speaking historians have generally followed the lead established by contemporary British observers who saw the war as a struggle between an evil Austrian Habsburg emperor seeking to impose Catholicism and valiant Protestant Germans fighting for their religious 'freedom'. Aided by the 'mercenary' general, Albrecht Wenzel Eusebius von Wallenstein, the Habsburgs finally had complete victory in their grasp when the German Protestants were 'saved' by the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus, who invaded the Empire in June 1630. Over the next two years, Gustavus won a string of spectacular victories which convinced later generations of military historians not only that he was one of the world's greatest generals, but that Sweden had 'revolutionized' war making.

Lützen became central to this received image, because it was where the Swedish Protestant 'hero-king' 'met his death in the hour of victory'.¹ However, unlike Yorktown (1781), Waterloo (1815), or Königgrätz (1866), Lützen did not end a conflict or even mark a significant turning point in the Thirty Years War, which continued for another sixteen years. It did not repel an invasion like Marathon (490 BCE), Trafalgar (1805), or the Battle of Britain (1940). It was extremely hard-fought, with over a quarter of the combatants being killed or seriously wounded during the nine hours of fighting, but the bloodletting did not constitute a heroic 'last stand' like Thermopylai (480 BCE), Little Big Horn (1876), Isandlwana (1879), or Dien Bien Phu (1954). Nor was Lützen 'decisive' in the sense of a clear-cut victory with immediate tangible strategic and political results, unlike Naseby (1645) or Blenheim (1704). Given these comparisons, it is fair to ask why so much significance has been attached to it and why it is still commemorated annually today.

The battle in 1632 was not the only one fought at Lützen. Napoleon scored a costly tactical victory over a combined Prussian and Russian army on 2 May 1813 just 4 km south of the scene of the earlier action.

Both are commemorated in large dioramas in the town's museum, with the Napoleonic battle represented by 5,500 miniature figures, or around 1,900 more than the one depicting the earlier engagement. While each has an important place in local heritage, only the first has secured a prominent place in history, while the second remains a footnote to the campaign which ended Napoleon's rule in Germany at the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig five months later.

The contrast between these two battles provides an opportunity to reflect on what makes a great historical 'event'. Neither ended a war or produced a major shift in international relations, yet the first battle of Lützen found an immediate echo in image and print, and became the object of political and historical disputes. Though its outcome has always remained contested, it is generally remembered as a great Swedish or, more broadly, 'Protestant' triumph thought worthy of official public commemoration and a firm place in military history. To study Lützen's legacy is to explore how such events are constantly rewritten as elements of propaganda, religious and national identity, and professional military culture. More specifically, the battle exemplifies how the Thirty Years War is remembered and how it has been written into wider military and European history.

Its impact is heightened by the presence of the seventeenth-century's two most famous generals, Wallenstein and Gustavus Adolphus, and above all by the latter's death. Swedish propaganda swiftly fostered the lasting image of the king's sacrifice for the Protestant cause against the spectre of Catholic Habsburg 'universal monarchy'. This heightened the confessional element in Swedish rhetoric, contributing to the general interpretation of the Thirty Years War as the last and most destructive of Europe's 'religious wars'. While confession played a part in Sweden's motives, most Germans had regarded its intervention in the Holy Roman Empire two years before as a foreign invasion. The image of selfless sacrifice was polished over the next sixteen years to legitimate Sweden's substantial territorial acquisitions in Germany that were confirmed by the Peace of Westphalia. The confessional dimension continued into the nineteenth century, becoming overlaid

by the struggle between Catholic Austria and Protestant Prussia for mastery of Germany.

The fact that Lützen was and has remained a predominantly Lutheran town assisted the development of a culture of public remembrance. After several near misses whilst campaigning in Catholic Poland, Gustavus narrowly escaped again whilst attacking Ingolstadt in Bavaria in April 1632 when his horse was killed beneath him.² His death on Catholic soil would have inhibited the kind of commemoration later associated with Lützen. He would not have been forgotten, but his memory would have become detached from the actual location of his death. It is this physical connection to the battlefield that first attracted wider attention during the eighteenth century and led to religious services at Lützen held annually since 1832 on 6 November in line with the old Julian calendar used by European Protestants until around 1700.

Changes in the way Gustavus' death has been remembered allow us to see how society has interpreted the notion of 'sacrifice' since the seventeenth century. The king's death has remained largely in its early modern form as an individual sacrifice of a hero-king and Protestant martyr, in contrast to the twentieth-century concept of collective sacrifice associated with the mass slaughter of the two world wars. Yet, Gustavus' continued prominence as a recognizable historical figure has contributed to the stronger memory of Lützen, in contrast to most other battles of the Thirty Years War (except, perhaps, White Mountain in 1620). Gustavus thus serves as a symbolic link to what is now clearly perceived as a distant pre-modern past.

Lützen's place in military history has even wider resonance. Gustavus is widely credited as the 'father' of the standing army; even of 'modern warfare'. His martial qualities were already emphasized by Swedish wartime propaganda, but what secured his reputation was the seal of approval by Napoleon and later generals. His campaigns became a core element of the curricula in nineteenth-century staff colleges, as well as in standard accounts of the rise of 'Western' warfare, not least through the influential 'military revolution' thesis. The battle marked

the climactic end of what seemed a lightning campaign of conquest since Gustavus' landing in northern Germany in June 1630 and which appeared to demonstrate the merits of the strategy and tactics of decision over those of attrition practised by Wallenstein.

Chapter 2 explores the deeper historical context for the battle by explaining the outbreak of the Thirty Years War and outlining its course until Sweden's intervention in 1630. Understanding what the war was about provides the necessary background for the discussion of the battle's legacy later in the book. Chapter 3 explains why the battle was fought by examining Gustavus' campaigns across 1630–2, as well as the wider network of alliances the Swedish king was trying to construct. Any attempt to reconstruct the battle itself is hindered by the hagiography of Gustavus as military innovator and Protestant saviour, as well as by the simple fact that it was fought in fog as well as in gunsmoke. Scarcely any of the contemporary accounts agree. Nonetheless, as Chapter 4 will show, such a reconstruction is worth attempting, because it is often the points of disagreement which have proved important for how Lützen is remembered. Chapter 5 assesses the battle's meaning for military history, beginning with its immediate aftermath before examining its place in debates about wider developments in warfare and military institutions. The discussion will build on the material presented across Chapters 2 to 4 to argue that the way Lützen came to be remembered greatly distorted perceptions of Gustavus' actual significance as a general and as a military innovator. Chapter 6 explains how and why Lützen became a site of a particular form of Protestant and national remembrance culture, and charts how this has persisted to the present.