

To Win with such a few Men: Explaining the Russian Defeat at the Battle of Wenden 1578

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1. Introduction

By autumn 1578, the Livonian War had been raging for more than twenty years. During this period, what began as a petty war on the Muscovy's western border grew in scale to a significant regional conflict in which all important contenders for Baltic dominance were involved. In the late 1570s, it was mostly Poland and Sweden that opposed the Russian expansionism in both series of field campaigns and sieges of fortified cities.

One of them was the city of Wenden (present-day Cēsis in Latvia, also referred to as Kieś in Polish sources), a much-desired target of multiple Russian incursions. Regardless of its importance, no major battle had taken place in its vicinity until October 1578. Only then an allied force of Swedes and Poles defeated the much stronger Russian host. The importance of this victory has been widely recognised since the sixteenth century, but the event itself has mostly evaded scholarly attention.

Therefore, my aim in this article is to contribute to the discussion about the battle of Wenden by establishing a novel timeline of events, more elaborate than those provided by historians so far, and analysing factors that eventually led to the defeat of the Russian host. In order to reconstruct the course of events, multiple primary sources are being used in this study. These, as well as the most important works from the secondary literature, are presented in the first part of this article. They are all either of Polish or German origin and careful comparison was undertaken to reconstruct the moves of both sides. The results of this effort are presented in the second part of the study, which is further followed by an assessment of factors that could led to the victory of the allied forces. I propose that it was the lack of sufficient reconnaissance, incorrect deployment of the Russian troops, and probably the inexperience of the Russian leadership which strongly influenced the outcome of the fighting.

2. Analysis of the available sources and summary of the scientific debate

2.1 Primary sources

Thanks to its significance and perhaps also due to its outcome, the battle of Wenden did not slip the attention of contemporaries. Thus, multiple sources describing this battle are available, although not all of them provide enough details about the course of events. Yet, many authors at least mentioned this event, mostly with a reference to the number of captured Russian guns.¹

One of the major sources is the *Chronica Der Prouints Lyfflandt*, written by Balthasar Rüssow. It was also translated into modern German in the nineteenth century and published under the name *Die Livländische Chronik*.² Rüssow's account is rich in detail and it is not concerned only with the bounty as other chroniclers' account of this time often are, yet it requires slight corrections at some points.

Two other German sources are of much smaller extent: the newspapers called *Mosconische Niederlag, vnd Belegerung der Statt Wenden*³ (further on referred to as "*Niederlag*"), and *Neue Zeitung. Von der herrlichen victori vnd Sieg, Welchen die Polnischen, Schwedischen vnnnd Deutschen Kriegsleut, für der Stadt Wenden in Lyfflandt, In diesem 1578* (further referred to as "*Neue Zeitung*").⁴ Although they are similar in length, their value differs significantly. *Neue Zeitung* is rich in valuable information corroborated by other sources whereas *Niederlag* provides the most confused and flawed description of events. Yet, with regards to several details, it might still prove important.

The most significant of the Polish sources is Bartosz Paprocki's account in his book *Herby rycerstwa polskiego*.⁵ Paprocki shares the point of view of the Poles, complementing the Swedish and German perspective provided by Rüssow and *Neue Zeitung*. Only slightly less informed is Reinhold Heidenstein's *De bello Moscovito commentatorium libri sex*. The author, serving as a secrete-

¹ Maciej Strykowski, *Kronika Polska, Litewska, Żmudzka i Wszystkiej Rusi* (Krolewiec: Jerzy Osterberger, 1582), 396, <https://obc.opole.pl/dlibra/publication/859/edition/703/content>.

² Balthasar Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik* (Reval: Verlag von F. J. Koppelson, 1845), <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10783340?page=,1&q=undefined>.

³ *Mosconische Niederlag, Vnd Belegerung Der Statt Wenden* (Nürnberg: Leonhard Heußler, 1579), <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10200438?page=2,3>.

⁴ *Neue Zeitung. Von Der Herrlichen Victori Und Sieg, Welchen Die Polnischen, Schwedischen Und Deudschen Kriegsleut, Für Der Stadt Wenden in Lyfflandt* (Lübeck: Balhorn, 1579), <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:70-dtl-0000011551>.

⁵ Bartosz Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego. Na Pięcioro Xiąg Rozdzieloné* (Krakow: Maciei Garwolczyk, 1584), <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/493672/edition/420360/content>.

tary to Polish King Stephen Bathory, had access to credible information that might help explain the Russian defeat. Finally, Joachim and Marcin Bielski's *Kronika polska, Marcina Bielskiego. Nowo przez Ioach.[ima] Bielskiego syna iego wydana*⁶ also includes a description of events, although this is rather short.

The only Russian source summarising the campaign of 1578 is *Razryadnaya kniga*.⁷ Unlike other primary sources, it describes the organisation of the Russian army and provides a full list of its commanders. Although this is an important part of military history, the value of *Razryadnaya kniga* as a source is rather minuscule as it does not add any new information about the battlefield events.

2.2 Scholarly debate

Even though the battle caught attention of many of its contemporaries, it is mostly ignored by modern historians. Notable exceptions are two Polish authors, Michał Paradowski and Dariusz Kupisz. In his book devoted to the Pskov campaign of 1581–1582, Kupisz briefly describes the battle as a part of the background to the later operations.⁸ Alternatively, Paradowski devoted a whole article only to the battle itself and provided its full description based on sources that were available to him.⁹ Although he did not use all the main sources about the battle, his article is a good summary of the events and also provides a well-assembled list of coalition forces.

The state of research is slightly better in Russia. Its outcome became a part of the argumentation in a dispute about Russian lower commanders¹⁰ in the Livonian War and some of its aspects were further researched by Alexei Lobin.

⁶ Marcin Bielski and Joachim Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego Nowo Przez Joachima Bielskiego Syna Jego Wydana* (Krakow: Jakub Sibeneycher, 1597), <https://cyfrowe.mnk.pl/dlibra/publication/19620/edition/19342/content>.

⁷ Viktor Buganov, ed., *Razryadnaya Kniga 1475–1605 Gg. T. III. Ch. I.* (Moskva, 1984).

⁸ Dariusz Kupisz, *Psków 1581–1582* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2006), 21.

⁹ Michał Paradowski, "Wielkie to Zwycięstwo: Bitwa Pod Kieśią (Wenden) 21 Października 1587 roku," 3, no. 1 (2013): 37–43.

¹⁰ Vitaliy Penskoj, "Centuriony Ivana Groznogo (Sredniy Komandnyy Sostav Russkogo Voyska 2-y Pol. XVI v.: K Postanovke Problemy," *Istoriya Voenno Dela: Issledovaniya i Istochniki*, no. Special'nyy vipusk. I. Russkaya armiya v epokhu carya Ivana IV Groznogo. Material'i nauchnoy diskussii k 455-letniyu nachala Livonskoi boiny – Ch. I. Stat'i (2012): 42–68; Igor Babulin, "V Zashchitu 'generalov'. Otzyv Na Stat'yu V.V. Penskogo 'Centuriony' Ivana Groznogo," *Istoriya Voenno Dela: Issledovaniya i Istochniki*, no. Special'nyy vipusk. I. Russkaya armiya v epokhu carya Ivana IV Groznogo. Material'i nauchnoy diskussii k 455-letniyu nachala Livonskoi boiny – Ch. II. Diskussiia (2012): 36–41; Aleksey Lobin, "K Polemike o 'centurionakh' i 'generalakh' Ivana Groznogo," *Istoriya Voenno Dela: Issledovaniya i Istochniki*, no. Special'nyy

Unlike the Polish historians, Lobin chose the Russian artillery as the object of his research, publishing an article¹¹ about it and mentioning it in his monograph¹² about Ivan the Terrible's artillery. He established the exact number of Russian guns that were used during the siege and also argued with accounts about the mass suicide of the gunners. He provided a short summary of the events too, but it lacks details and is only used to provide context for his main argument.

Significantly more attention was devoted to the battle in the Russian social media environment.¹³ These articles and blog posts are more numerous than regular academic works but their contribution to the discussion is rather negligible. They mostly use Paradowski's and Lobin's article as their main source and provide a brief commentary on them. Overall, their value as secondary sources is small, yet they might help spread information about the neglected battle.

3. Reconstruction of the course of events

3.1 The beginning of the October 1578 campaign

The hostilities between the Russian and coalition forces comprising of Polish and Swedish troops began on 15 October when the Russians launched the siege of Wenden. During the five following days, they did not manage to take the city, although they tried to overcome its defences, as the death of two prominent Russians mentioned by *Razryadnaya kniga* implies.¹⁴ Besides this effort, their attention was directed towards the erection of strong field fortifications, where their artillery was stationed. The news about the Russian threat spread quickly as the Wenden garrison managed to dispatch a messenger with a call for help.

vipusk. I. Russkaya armiya v epokhu carya Ivana IV Groznogo. Material'i nauchnoy diskussii k 455-letniyu nachala Livonskoi boiny – Ch. II. Diskussiya (2012): 42–45.

¹¹ Aleksey Lobin, "K Voprosu o Sostave Russkoy Artillerii v Bitve Pod Vendenom 21–22 Oktyabrya 1578 Goda," in *Voyna i Oruzhye. Novye Issledovaniya i Materialy* (Sankt-Peterburg: VIMANiViS, 2015), 85–96.

¹² Aleksey Lobin, *Artilleriya Ivana Groznogo* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2019), 262–75.

¹³ Vsemirnaya Istoriya, "21 Oktyabrya 1578 Goda Proizoshla Bitva Pod Vendenom...", accessed July 19, 2023, https://vk.com/wall-7768848_19489; POKOLENIE ISTORIKOV, "BITVA PRI VENDENE," OK.RU, 2021, <https://ok.ru/pokolenieistorikov/topic/154183804685075>; Istoriya..., "Bitva Pri Vendene," VK, 2022, https://vk.com/wall-180951976_5293.

¹⁴ Buganov, *Razryadnaya Kniga*, 44.

Forces that could have helped Wenden were constrained in numbers. The first to react were Polish and Swedish units stationed nearby that gathered in hurry. The Swedish host, commanded by Göran Boie, numbered about 1,300–1,500 foot and 700–800 mounted soldiers. On the Polish side, the resistance was organised by Andrzej Sapieha who managed to muster 2,000 men¹⁵ and move towards Mijan, where they met with the Swedish host.

This relatively weak force had to face an army up to five times as big. Primary sources suggest the Russian troops numbered 20,000¹⁶–22,000¹⁷ men. Ironically, the most information about this force is provided by *Niederlag*¹⁸—proven to be the least reliable source referring about the battle—initially, the 28,000 strong army laid siege to Wenden but in the course of the hostilities, a 8,000 strong detachment left the main force with one of its strongest guns. It might be stated with a high degree of certainty that roughly 20,000 Russian troops were present near Wenden at the dawn of 21 October. Only Alexei Lobin disputes this figure, proposing a much lower number (about 5,000 troops) but he does not provide sufficient reasoning.¹⁹ His assessment of the neighbouring countryside as devastated by long hostilities might be correct but does not prove the sources wrong. The Russians could have carried the necessary supplies with them and they did not have to rely on the countryside to gather food which would enable a bigger army to be raised but the sources do not provide sufficient information to reconstruct the Russian logistics. Due to the lack of data, it is hard to either refute the claim of the sources or prove them right. However, because most of the sources concur about the size of the Russian army, I will take for granted that the coalition army faced a numerically superior enemy.

3.2 March to the city and the crossing of the Gauja

The coalition army departed from Mijan on the night of 20 October, planning to arrive at the city in the early hours of the following day. En route, the corps clashed with Russian patrols but managed to avoid great casualties. Initially, its commanders intended to surprise the Russians by crossing the river Gauja at an unguarded ford but perhaps due to the heavy rain or bad knowledge of local terrain, they went astray and in the morning the army ended up at

¹⁵ Paradowski, “Wielkie to Zwycięstwo,” 40.

¹⁶ Strykowski, *Kronika Polska*, 396.

¹⁷ Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 703.

¹⁸ *Mosconische Niederlag*, 8.

¹⁹ Lobin, “K Polemike o ‘centurionakh,’” 44.

a different – and this time guarded – ford.²⁰ *Razryadnaya kniga* claims that the coalition army approached unnoticed, but this is probably a justification for the humiliating defeat, similarly to the vague estimate of the opposing army's size that was possibly intended to explain the defeat by the superior numbers of the enemy.²¹

The ford was guarded by a group of thousand Russian and Tatar cavalymen. Such a small detachment armed with only light weapons and accustomed to the cavalry way of fighting could not have resisted the onslaught and after the field guns were deployed by the coalition, the resistance died down quickly.²²

Some doubts are cast on this interpretation by Bielski's account. It includes an enigmatic sentence which suggests that the defenders of the crossing retreated when they noticed that the coalition host was small, which would suggest that it was only a unit of scouts: "*potym obaczywszy Moskwę że nąszych mało dała im pokoy aż sie przeprowili*".²³ Nonetheless, if these soldiers had been only a scouting force, the fight would have possibly been much shorter and could have been ended without the help of the artillery, as the Russians would have retreated once the intelligence had been gathered. Also, the size of the detachment proves it to be rather a unit sent to either stop or delay the enemy since the number of scouts would have been smaller. On the other hand, Russian commanders were apt at using field fortifications in open battles. The general lack of pikemen left the Russian infantry vulnerable to cavalry charges, forcing it to rely on different ways of protection.²⁴ It would seem logical for the Russian command (and doctrinally sound, if we might speak of doctrine in this period) to fortify the ford and man it with infantry. Yet, only a weak cavalry detachment was present at the ford, which would suggest that their aim was not to entirely stop the enemy. However, this does not prove on its own that the thousand-men-strong force were scouts but rather shows that the battle plan of the Russian command relied on a kind of layered defence as shown in the final part of this article, however poorly prepared this defence

²⁰ Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 704.

²¹ Buganov, *Razryadnaya Kniga*, 45.

²² Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 704; Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286; *Neue Zeitung*, 5.

²³ Bielski and Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego*, 777.

²⁴ Richard Hellie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 163; Brian Davies, "Guliai-Gorod, Wagenburg, and Tabor Tactics in 16th–17th Century Muscovy and Eastern Europe," in *Warfare in Eastern Europe, 1500–1800*, ed. Brian J. Davies (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 93–108.

may have been. Bielski's enigmatic sentence thus cannot be regarded as a correct assessment of Russian intentions.

3.3 Cavalry clash

Once the Russian detachment had withdrawn, nothing prevented the coalition from crossing the Gauja. The foot soldiers mounted the horses of the cavalrymen so that one horse carried two men. On the other shore, the whole army formed its array and started to pray as proven unanimously by all sources mentioning the crossing.²⁵ After the prayers, the full-scale field battle started, either by a Russian²⁶ or coalition²⁷ charge.

No single source fully explains what happened next and only a synthesis can bear fruit. As each of the sources had a different informant, each focuses on different parts of the battlefield. *Niederlag*—perhaps the least informed source—does not mention any cavalry clash at all and describes only two charges against the field fortifications led by Swedish officers.²⁸ *Neue Zeitung* includes the information that the Russian array was thrown into disorder by German riders.²⁹ Heidenstein insists that the Russian cavalry was the first to retreat and that the Tatars fled in panic but he does not explain what caused it.³⁰ Rüssow's account does not offer anything new, as it only states that the Russian host retreated as the superiority of the coalition was so great that the Russians could not have resisted it.³¹ Paprocki claims that the main effort was undertaken by the coalition cavalry as it clashed with its mounted adversaries and implies that the coalition infantry attempted to seize the Russian camp already at the beginning of the field encounter by stating that the Russians besieged later on in the camp did not have any gunpowder because

²⁵ Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 704; Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286; *Neue Zeitung*, 5.

²⁶ Bielski and Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego*, 777.

²⁷ Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286; Reinhold Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki Wojny Moskiewskiej w 6 Księgach* (Lwów: Towarzystwo nauczycieli szkół wyższych, 1894), 35, <https://zbc.uz.zgora.pl/dlibra/show-content/publication/edition/29004?id=29004>; Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 704; *Neue Zeitung*, 5–6.

²⁸ *Mosconische Niederlag*, 6.

²⁹ “[...]mit dem sie so lange Scharmützel/biß das die Deudsche un[d] Röhnfahne ein vorteil aus gefehen [...] Vnd haben den Feind dermaffen angegriffen/das er die flucht genom[m]en/vnd sich nach der Schantze ins vorteil begeben wöllen.” *Neue Zeitung*, 6.

³⁰ “Naprzód poszła v rozsypkę jazda nieprzyjacielska, gdy zwlaszcza Tatarzy pierchnęli bezładnie.” Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki*, 35.

³¹ Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286.

it had exploded during an unspecified fight at the beginning of the battle.³² All this contradictory information must be reconciled in order to reconstruct the events.

In order to accomplish that, certain mismatches must be settled first, among others whether the first storm of the camp and field fortifications was simultaneous with the cavalry clash. The fact that only *Niederlag* and Paprocki mention this charge does not mean they are wrong. The informants of other authors could have been on different parts of the battlefield and they probably did not have situational awareness good enough to notice it, they could have forgotten about it or simply it might have been left out from their account by the authors of the sources. Moreover, the other sources do not mention the role of the coalition infantry in the battle and it is probable that it was used for the purpose for which it was better fit than the cavalry for storming the camp and field fortifications. Otherwise, it would have been standing idly in the rear of the fighting horsemen, enabling the Russians to freely reinforce the fighting units with the force left in the camp. Therefore, it is plausible that the coalition infantry was deployed simultaneously with the cavalry but in the different part of the battlefield.

The real problem with this charge is who exactly took part in it. *Niederlag* ascribes the command to Hans Wachtmeister and Heinrich von Enden,³³ but according to other sources, the former commanded the German cavalry detachment³⁴ that is claimed by *Neue Zeitung*³⁵ to defeat the Russian horsemen. Moreover, *Niederlag*, among other mistakes, only mentions the fight for the camp, proving itself to be either the least informed or the most flawed primary source. Information provided by it might be used if it is general enough but fine details must be cross-referenced and possibly discarded. In this case, it seems more plausible that Wachtmeister commanded his organic unit and that the charge was undertaken by the Swedish infantry.

The situation is much clearer with regards to the cavalry engagement. German riders are said by *Neue Zeitung* to have exploited a certain unspecified

³² "[...]ochotnie skoczyli do nieprzyjaciela/pretkością a śmiałością nie długo Moskwę wespół. Wpādłā w oboz Moskwa/oni zā nimi bijac/śiekac/kloli bo fie Moskwā zāpomniawšy/kryla fie nie myślac o obronie. [...] Wyprawił do nich Hetman cztery stā ludzi peišo [...] przeciwko ktorym też oni z śańcow wyflāli dwānaście fet tāk iedno z śāblami/bo prochow do ruśnic nie mieli/w Obozie im byl zā nieopātrznym strzelaniem pogorzał/wielko škode w moskwi/bā y w naBych wczynił[...]" Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 704–5.

³³ *Mosconische Niederlag*, 6.

³⁴ Paradowski, "Wielkie to Zwycięstwo," 40.

³⁵ *Neue Zeitung*, 6.

advantage.³⁶ This advantage might have been provided by the fighting style of the Tatars, who, according to Heidenstein, left the battlefield among the first.³⁷ Due to their light armament and low morale, their fighting style was typical for the light cavalry, full of manoeuvres, retreats, and attacks.³⁸ Such a style requires space to be successfully employed and if space is lacking, a well-timed enemy attack might prove decisive, forcing the light cavalry to flee. With the German cavalry in close pursuit, fleeing Tatars probably wreaked havoc among the other Russian cavalymen who also retreated. Some of them possibly sought protection in the camp, from which they later on counterattacked the Poles. No other source disputes this interpretation, only Bielski states that the fight lasted long.³⁹

Bielski does, however, claim that a part of the Russian army attempted to storm the city during the battle.⁴⁰ His claim is unsupported by other sources and it does not seem probable that the Russians, being under attack, would have had enough troops to storm the city. Yet, some fighting with the city garrison is assumed by Paradowski who quotes but does not cite a primary source of Swedish origin.⁴¹ However, this possible skirmish would have had only a minor influence on the main events and its sole existence can be doubted.

3.4 The siege of the camp and field fortifications

Once success in the cavalry fight had been achieved, the attention of the coalition commanders shifted towards the Russian camp and their field fortifications. The exact course of events is murky at this point as each of the major sources describes the events in a different manner.

Paprocki mentions that 400 dismounted men were dispatched to deal with the remaining Russians stationed in the camp and that these were met with a counterattack of 1,200 men. According to him, the Poles massacred their adversaries. He also adds that the Russians could have only attacked with their sabres since their gunpowder exploded during the previous attempts of the

³⁶ *Neue Zeitung*, 6.

³⁷ Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki*, 35.

³⁸ Giles Fletcher, "Of the Russe Commonwealth," in *Rude & Barbarous Kingdom*, ed. Lloyd Berry and Robert Crummey (Madison, Milwaukee, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 193.

³⁹ Bielski and Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego*, 777.

⁴⁰ By stating "[...]â ci od dobywania zamku fkoçzyli do obozu[...]" Bielski and Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego*, 778.

⁴¹ Paradowski, "Wielkie to Zwycięstwo," 41.

coalition army to storm the camp (see note 32). Simultaneously with this foray, some of the retreating cavalymen returned to the battlefield from a nearby forest and joined the fight, but were repelled.⁴²

Other sources differ in the description of events that took place in the camp. *Neue Zeitung* claims that the retreating cavalry was pursued by coalition troops and because it could not have retreated to the field fortifications, it had to resist in the open field, where it was routed.⁴³ The fight continued when the coalition attacked the field fortifications which were finally captured only after four other futile attempts. It also states that the defenders intentionally burned all their gunpowder so it could not fall into their enemies' hands.⁴⁴ According to *Niederlag*, the fortifications were stormed two times and only the second attempt was this successful.⁴⁵ Heidenstein does not mention any attack on the camp during the first day of the battle and Rüssow, similarly to *Neue Zeitung*, claims that when the Russian cavalry fled, the coalition horsemen were in a close pursuit and the fight continued in the camp itself. Eventually, coalition troops emerged victorious and took the camp, but the Russians defending the field fortifications were not yet defeated. Rüssow was aware that the final stage of the battle took place within the field fortifications only in the morning of 22 October, but dates the capture of the camp to the first day.⁴⁶ Reconciling these pieces of information is a difficult, yet possible.

It is clear that the best-informed accounts are those of *Neue Zeitung* and Paprocki, and although they differ, they do not have to be discarded completely. Information provided by *Neue Zeitung* mostly concurs with Paprocki's account – their description of the crossing of the Gauja is almost identical, even though their information came from two different sources. Paprocki is more concerned with the Poles, whereas *Neue Zeitung* focuses on the German and Swedish troops. They both mostly omit the point of view from the side of the coalition, which suggests that their sources were well informed but reflected different battlefield experiences. Because it was the Poles who were dispatched to fight the returning cavalry, it is possible that the events at this part of the battlefield were unknown to the Swedes or Germans who

⁴² Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 705.

⁴³ *Neue Zeitung*, 6.

⁴⁴ "Es follen auch die Reuffen/in betrachtung wie sie nach folcher erlittenen niderlage von ihrem Herren möchten empfangen werden/viel Puluers angezündet/vnd sich also felbft vmbs Leben gebracht haben/welchs nicht allein sie/fondern auch etzlich Gefchütz vnd andere nodturfft in die Luft geführt." *Neue Zeitung*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Mosconische Niederlag*, 6.

⁴⁶ Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286.

were supposedly in a different part of the battlefield and that might have not noticed a pause between two clashes. *Neue Zeitung's* retreat of the cavalry that was unable to resist the coalition onslaught might be a confused description of the result of the Polish countercharge against the returning Russians described by Paprocki. If the battlefield chaos and the fog of war are taken into account, segments of these accounts might partially be reconciled.

However, this does not mean that Paprocki's description is entirely correct. If it really had been cavalry who attacked from the camp, this would correspond to the way of fighting to attack without a single shot being fired, as cavalry relied predominantly on bows and not firearms,⁴⁷ so this might simply be his misinterpretation based on scarce information. Moreover, as it is shown further on, it seems more plausible that the gunpowder was either captured by the victorious Poles and Swedes, or destroyed in the later stage of the battle. Nonetheless, this is not the only mistake in his account.

The other mistake is the fate of the counterattacking Russians. At least two high-ranking officers who were supposedly in charge of the cavalry were still present in the camp with their men when the night fell,⁴⁸ so at least a part of the deployed force managed to escape and withdrew entirely a few hours later. It is possible that these two commanders entered the camp with the cavalrymen re-emerging from the forest but this remains unlikely, as these troops were blocked by the Poles. It seems more plausible that they withdrew to the camp after the cavalry engagement had been lost and attempted to delay the coalition with this foray, intending to withdraw under the cover of the night. Therefore, Paprocki's description here is likely correct in a general sense (i. e., that the engagement happened and that it was won by the coalition) but mistaken in stating the whole force was annihilated.

Significantly more different is Rüssow's account. Because of the similarities, it is possible that his information came from a source not far from the *Neue Zeitung's* informant. Therefore, the same reasoning applies to his account as to the comparison between *Neue Zeitung* and Paprocki – perhaps his informant was in a different place when the pursuit and Russian foray happened so his knowledge of it was rather superficial. Thus, Rüssow's version, based probably on misinterpreted information that omits the later skirmishes with the Russians, does not prove the better-informed Paprocki wrong, it only has to be corrected in the sense the remaining Russians resisted in their camp and not in the field fortifications.

⁴⁷ Michael Fredholm von Essen, *Muscovy's Soldiers* (Warwick: Helion, 2018), 14.

⁴⁸ Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki*, 35.

3.5 Night and the morning after

The misinterpretation of the cavalry engagement and its consequences is not the greatest flaw of *Neue Zeitung*. According to the newspaper, the field fortifications and the camp had already been taken during the first day. This fight was intense and only the fifth attempt to storm the fortifications was successful.⁴⁹ However, other sources state that there was a pause in the fighting caused by the night and fatigue on the coalition side.⁵⁰ The remaining sources do not mention it directly but enable such an interpretation. Bielski's *Kronika* does not specifically state that the hostilities stopped at nightfall but its wording allows for such an interpretation. According to the *Kronika*, the battle lasted for a "long time" and the camp was not taken immediately after the cavalry clash. Most of the sources either explicitly claim that the camp was not taken by the evening of the 21 October or enable this interpretation, so the narration of *Neue Zeitung* must be discarded at this point, and it must be concluded that the coalition entered the camp only in the morning of 22 October.

The only problematic source in this case is again *Niederlag*. It enables the same interpretation as Bielski's *Kronika*, making it possible to insert a night between the two attacks. But, this raises additional mismatch that needs to be tackled. *Niederlag* states that the coalition had to attack in order to occupy the Russian fortifications, slaying 6,000 in the process, which contradicts the other sources' description of a peaceful capitulation of the Russians. This might be perceived as just another of the author's blunders and neglect, but in this case, the narration misses one attempt to seize the camp shown by other sources, as discussed above. Due to such a high number of casualties, it seems that *Niederlag's* author attributed the overall casualties only to the second charge. This proves the informational value of this pamphlet is low since the rest of it recounts atrocities committed by the Russian host,⁵¹ and lacks information provided by most of other sources, focusing instead on a list of captured Russian officers and guns and other spoils of war.⁵² Although *Niederlag* might prove itself important during the assessment of the Russian strength and casualties, its narration about the battlefield events can mostly be discarded due to its dubious quality, and the differences between it and other sources should be ignored.

⁴⁹ *Neue Zeitung*, 6.

⁵⁰ Rüssow, *Die Livländische Chronik*, 286; Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki*, 35–6; Paprocki, *Herby Rycerstwa Polskiego*, 705.

⁵¹ *Mosconische Niederlag*, 5.

⁵² *Mosconische Niederlag*, 6–8.

What is certain is that a part of the remaining Russian host retreated during the night relatively freely.⁵³ The other, perhaps smaller part remained in the camp to be taken captive by the victors, including the gun crews. According to multiple sources, they committed mass suicide,⁵⁴ which is probably a myth as Alexey Lobin proved in his monograph.⁵⁵

Consequently, all of the Russian guns were taken but it is unclear what happened to the gunpowder. As mentioned above, Paprocki claimed that the Russians ran out of their gunpowder when it exploded during the first coalition attack. This is mostly supported by *Neue Zeitung*, which mentions that Russians resisting the final coalition onslaught decided to burn their supply of gunpowder.⁵⁶ It seems that the account of *Neue Zeitung* is more accurate—Paprocki is focused on the Poles who were in a different part of the battlefield. It also seems that the destruction of the gunpowder happened during the later stage of the fight for the field fortifications and that it was only partial, since the rest of it could have been stored in the camp.

At this point, it is also important to make a note about the camp-field fortifications dichotomy. Some of the sources distinguish between these two terms, other mention only one of them. It seems plausible that there was a Russian camp that was separated from the field fortifications where the guns were stationed during the siege and that it was taken by the coalition only on the morning of the second day. However, it is unclear when were the field fortifications occupied by the coalition troops. Only a detailed map of the battlefield would help answer the question which parts of the fortifications were taken and when and where was the Russian camp. As no such a contemporary map is known, we are left to guess. What is certain is that the Russians abandoned the field fortifications – or the part they still controlled – during the night in order to retreat. It is possible that they were unoccupied until the next morning but some of parts could have been taken already on 21 October. Unless a trustworthy source depicting the battlefield is found or an archaeological survey which would unearth the ramparts is undertaken, it is impossible to draw an accurate map of the battlefield.

⁵³ Heidenstein, *Pamiętniki*, 36.

⁵⁴ Heidenstein, 36; Bielski and Bielski, *Kronika Polska Marcina Bielskiego*, 778; *Neue Zeitung*, 7.

⁵⁵ Lobin, *Artilleriya Ivana Groznogo*, 262.

⁵⁶ *Neue Zeitung*, 7.

3.6 Summary of the course of events

As the reconstruction of events might be difficult to follow within the debate about the reconciliation of the sources and their credibility, I will provide a brief overview of the events in this section.

The battle started in the morning 21 October when the coalition army arrived to a ford occupied by a relatively weak Russian detachment. Although the original plan of the coalition was to arrive to the besieged town via an unguarded river crossing, due to the mistake of its leaders or guides the army went astray on the night and eventually had to face the Russian opposition.

The resistance was soon broken with the help of the coalition artillery and the army could have crossed the Gauja river and developed its array on the opposing bank. There, the cavalry engagement began soon after the Russian host gathered and the coalition army had prayed.

From this clash, the coalition cavalymen emerged victorious. The victory was probably achieved by an apt manoeuvring of the German horsemen, who probably exploited a gap within the Russian rank, making the Tatars flee with their charge. Soon after, the whole Russian cavalry retreated. In the meantime, the coalition infantry attempted to storm the Russian camp but it was repulsed.

After they had won the cavalry clash, coalition troops attempted to seize the camp once more. They were met by a Russian foray which they managed to rout. However, this was their only achievement as they were repelled by the Russian camp garrison. Those who did not join the attack on the camp had to deal with the Russian cavalry returning to the battlefield in an attempt to turn the tide of the battle. This fight ended with a Russian retreat that also ended the first day of hostilities.

On the following night, part of the Russian camp garrison escaped from the camp, leaving their guns and supplies there with a small force who was perhaps intended as a rearguard. Eventually in the morning, the Poles and the Swedes entered the camp taking the remaining Russians captives and seizing their guns and supplies.

4. Causes of the Russian defeat

With the timeline of events reconstructed, it is possible to assess which factors shaped the Russian battlefield performance. Three causes of the defeat are identified in this part of the article, all which became apparent either in the opening stage of the hostilities or preceded it: insufficient Russian

reconnaissance, incorrect deployment of the Russian troops, and perhaps the inexperience of the Russian leaders. In the later stage of the fighting (i. e., after the cavalry clash), the Russian command mostly managed to avoid bigger mistakes.

At this point, it must be stressed that other factors such as the organisation of the armies, their (combat) fatigue, morale, or logistics could have influenced the outcome of the battle as well. However, due to the fact that none of the available sources describe the battle in sufficient detail to assess these aspects as well, I omit them in my analysis. Nevertheless, these factors could have proven important for the Russian defeat and a further comparative analysis of this battle would have to be undertaken to find possible similarities with other contemporary battles either of the Livonian War or other European struggles. Therefore, the proposed reasoning of the Russian defeat might not be complete, although the identified mistakes shaped the result of the clash.

Chronologically the first decisive factor that can be determined on the basis of the primary sources was the lack of good Russian reconnaissance. The Russians probably noticed the coalition army only when it was too late, during its final march to Wenden on the night of 20 October. If they had noticed the accumulating enemy forces earlier, these could have been pursued by Tatar light cavalry during the whole march from their initial locations to the grouping point in Mijan. According to Paprocki, Tatars were sent to reconnaissance the surroundings but except for a minor skirmish with Sapieha's men in Nowe Mlyny and a few small engagements in the night before the battle, no effort was undertaken to seriously harass the coalition army. The Russian command did not even recognise all the places where it was possible to cross the Gauja. If the coalition had had a better guide, it could have crossed the river in secrecy and begun the fight with a significant advantage. Only bad luck prevented the coalition from approaching completely unnoticed. This, as well as the lack of harassment of the enemy is a clear failure of the Russian command and better information provided by the light troops could have been utilised to bolster the defence.

The lack of intelligence also prevented the Russians from exploiting their biggest advantage in defence: the flow of the Gauja. Determined defence of the ford or reinforcing its defenders would have prevented the coalition from crossing the river and exploiting its greatest advantage, the cavalry charge that eventually proved decisive.

With regards to the defence of the ford, another influential factor might be determined: incorrect deployment of available forces. A thousand horsemen were not sufficient to stop the enemy's army by any means, especially if the

field guns were employed. A better choice would have been for the Russian command to strengthen the position with field fortifications, man them with infantry or dismounted cavalry armed with firearms, and dispatch the several pieces of lighter artillery it had available. Aleksei Lobin claims that the Russian artillery was ill-suited for an ordinary battle due to its huge calibre,⁵⁷ yet he himself included light guns in his list of Russian pieces which were captured by the victors.⁵⁸ Moreover, Rüssow implies that the Russians used some of their guns during the defence of the field fortifications later on, which is supported by *Neue Zeitung* mentioning a certain Hartwig Ledebur or Lodeburg, who is said to have been wounded by a piece of a great calibre.⁵⁹ Although Paprocki suggests that there were multiple points where it was possible to cross the Gauja which would ultimately make it harder to defend all of them, with the total force numbering up to 20,000 men, it would not have diminished the fighting capacity of the army, had the Russian command manned each of these possible points of crossing by a small force with the aim to delay the enemy and provide time for the main force to prepare for a counterattack. Better manning of the fords would have provided the Russians advantage in defence and would have added an additional defence line between them and their adversaries.

Aside from poor intelligence, the decision not to fight over the ford might have been caused by a general reluctance of the Russian commanders to attack their enemies in a big, open battle caused possibly by the nature of steppe warfare.⁶⁰ Due to this careful mindset, the Russian commanders probably chose more defensive tactics, based upon forays from the fortified camp. On its own, this proved successful in multiple other clashes, and this time it would have been more advantageous to prevent the opposing army from attacking the main line of defence and move the fighting as far from it as possible, making the defence layered. In a combination with good reconnaissance and harassment of the coalition army en route to the city, the cumulation of mistakes that eventually led to the defeat could have been prevented.

However, bad intelligence only allowed the coalition to cross the Gauja, not to win the entire battle. Another factor must have come into play and it

⁵⁷ Lobin, "K Voprosu o Sostave Russkoy Artillerii," 85.

⁵⁸ Lobin, 94.

⁵⁹ *Neue Zeitung*, 8.

⁶⁰ Oleg Kurbatov, "Ocherki Razvitiya Taktiki Russkoy Konnicy 'sotennyi Sluzhby's Serediny XVI v. Do Serediny XVII b.," in *Voennaya Archeologiya. Sbornik Materialov Problemnogo Soveta 'Voennaya Archeologiya' Pri Gosudarstvennom Istoricheskom Muzei. Vyp. 2*, ed. Oleg Dvurechskiy (Moskva: Russkaya panorama, 2011), 61, <https://www.archaeolog.ru/ru/el-bib/el-cat/el-periodical/voen-arch/voen-arch-2>.

might be assessed that it was incorrect deployment of the Russian units. The Tatars were among those who left the battlefield first and who did so probably due to their fighting style. Their high demands on free space could have been exploited by the heavier German cavalry when there was not enough room to manoeuvre flawlessly. With no means to resist the German charge, the Tatars probably fled towards the regular Russian troops, spreading panic among them. This enabled the German cavalry, who was probably in close pursuit of the Tatars, to break the Russian ranks. Bielski and Rüssow maintain that the battle lasted a long time before the Russians retreated, so the German attack on the Tatars happened during its later stages when the armies were closer to each other and deprived each other the freedom of broad manoeuvres. It was perhaps the fault of the Russian command not to withdraw the Tatars earlier, after the opening stage in which they could have proven helpful.

Force deployment probably was not the only cause of the defeat in the cavalry clash. In his article about mid- and low-level commanders, Vitaliy Penskoï argues that the top leaders of the Russian armies in the Livonian war were inexperienced and ill-prepared to successfully command such huge armies.⁶¹ He was criticised by Igor Babulin,⁶² who claimed that it is impossible to draw such far-reaching conclusions with such a small evidence base, but to me it seems that Penskoï's main point really is supported by the outcome of this battle. The top Russian command was unable to exploit the advantage stemming from its superior numbers, but proved capable when only smaller forces remained at its disposal. The foray, as well as the return of the routed cavalry and the night escape prove that it was not completely incompetent when it commanded smaller forces. Both undertakings helped preserve at least a part of the force.

With regards to later events, the Russian commanders probably did not blunder; the regrouping of fleeing forces is always a difficult task. Nevertheless, they managed to form a new counterattack with the fleeing units. Although this counterattack was eventually unsuccessful, as well as the foray from the camp, Russian commanders are probably not to be blamed – to achieve victory, they would have needed troops with higher morale, skill, and military training. Also, the nearly complete night withdrawal cannot be deemed as a blunder; low situational awareness prevented the Russian command from assessing the situation soberly and retreat was the only option left for them as further resistance seemed futile. Only guns had to be left in the camp, as they would have hindered the withdrawal but with the aim of preserving the army,

⁶¹ Penskoï, "Centuriony" Ivana Groznogo," 59–60.

⁶² Babulin, "V Zashchitu 'generalov'".

leaving them behind was a good decision. Therefore, it might be concluded that after the defeat in the cavalry engagement, the Russian command did not make any significant mistakes and did everything possible to either turn the tide of battle or save as many lives as possible.

Thanks to that, Russian commanders might be seen as inexperienced and bad planners but apt improvisers who were, under the pressure of bad conditions, capable of achieving relatively great successes. However, to fully prove this point, the previous career of the leaders would have to be scrutinised and taken into account.

5. Conclusion

Although the battle of Wenden has mostly avoided scholarly attention, its outcome as well as the performance of the Russian army might prove crucial for the research of the Muscovite military in the second half of the sixteenth century. Therefore, the aim of this article is to present a synthesis of primary sources that describes this struggle and assess which factors influenced its outcome.

With regards to the synthesis of the information provided by the primary sources, a clear timeline of events has been established. Contrary to previous attempts, more sources have been taken into account, making it more detail-rich – for example the use of field guns by the Russians during the defence of the camp implied by Rüssow has been included in the proposed description of the course of events. Furthermore, I attempted to explain why the sources differ, most probably because their informants did not have the same battle-field experience and in some cases their account has probably been modified to make the battlefield events seem more heroic.

In the analysis of the Russian failure, I proposed two factors to be crucial for the disaster to happen: bad reconnaissance and incorrect deployment of forces. Bad reconnaissance prevented the Russian command from harassing the enemy, who could have otherwise arrived to the city less organised and perhaps partly demoralised, and this also prevented Russian forces from buttressing the garrison of the ford. Later during the battle, incorrect deployment of forces enabled the coalition to cross the Gauja and the presumed bad manoeuvre of the Tatar cavalry in the later stage of the fight provided the coalition an edge in the clash.

If any of these mistakes had been avoided by the Russian command, the outcome of the battle could have been different. Avoidance would probably not bring victory on its own but complete disaster could have been and probably

would have been averted. However, it was mostly their mistakes which enabled the smaller Polish and Swedish force to eventually prevail.⁶³

Abstract

The battle of Wenden of 1578 was one of the major clashes of the Livonian War. It is significant both for its contemporaries and also for modern historians since it shows how different armies of early modern Eastern Europe acted on the battlefield. This article presents a novel reconstruction of the battlefield events, reconciling pieces of information from contemporary sources. However, its main aim is to assess which factors caused the Russian defeat against a much weaker enemy. Although the primary sources do not allow a thorough analysis of all factors, three of them might be identified: the lack of good reconnaissance, incorrect deployment of the Russian troops, and the inexperience of the Russian leadership.

Keywords: Battle of Wenden 1578; Livonian War; 16th Century Warfare; Muscovite Military, Early Modern Eastern Europe

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⁶³ Bibliographical note: as all of the relevant primary sources are available online as scanned documents, I decided to provide the number of a scan instead of the original page number. I decided to do so because some of the sources lack the pagination entirely and it would cause inconveniences if two systems of reference were used for digitised documents.