



2022 History Essay Contest Homeschool Highschool Winner

The Miracle on the Vistula

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The Battle of Warsaw, otherwise known as the Miracle on the Vistula, is an important historical event that has been greatly overshadowed in history. This oversight is due to the great interest in and importance of other events that occurred before and after this conflict. Even so, the Polish-Soviet War of 1920 was the last great “War between the Wars” that had the potential to make or break the continent of Europe. The Communist leaders of Russia had struck down foe after foe in the bloody civil war that followed the fall of the Russian Empire, and with Europe in a perilous state, there was little to stand in the way of their expansion east.

The end of WWI provided an opportunity for many countries in Eastern Europe. Some were able to resurrect their states, while some were able to expand the territories of their countries, and still others aimed for dominance over the whole of Europe. The most ambitious of these states was the newly formed Soviet Russia. After winning the civil war in Russia and defeating the counter-revolutionary forces that opposed it, Russia was poised to take advantage of a weakened Europe ripe for the taking. Their first point of business was to invade Germany and install a puppet regime that would aid the Russians in their purpose of global revolution. However, before they could reach Germany they would have to get through Poland. Polish President Pilsudski knew this and so quickly worked to assemble an army strong enough to resist the Russian hordes, after which he moved to reoccupy Poland’s former territories in the East. Russia also believed those territories to be theirs and skirmishes erupted between the two sides (Chapple,

2020). Impatient to expand their power, Lenin and Trotsky, the leaders of the Communist revolution in Russia, ordered General Mikhail Tukhachevsky to commence his invasion of Poland, even though he had less than half as many troops as had been planned. The invasion did not go well, and the Polish, supported by Ukrainian rebel force; mounted an offensive into Russian territory. This resulted in the short-lived capture of Kiev (Fleming, 2020). However, the Russians built up a far larger army and this time routed the Polish forces, pushing them back into Poland and all the way to the capital of Warsaw (Chapple 2020).

As the weary defenders dug in around the city of Warsaw, the Red Army amassed in massive numbers to overwhelm the Poles. The Russians had three times the artillery of the Polish army and they now put it to good use. Volley after volley tore up the ground on the opposite bank of the Vistula River where the Polish forces had entrenched themselves. Pilsudski saw that his chances of winning were low, but he did not even consider the option of surrender, despite the repeated French and British messages urging him to give in to the Soviets to avoid annihilation. Instead, he gathered together as many of his forces as he could for a surprise attack on the Russian left flank, an attack which was denounced as foolish by many onlookers (Lukenbill, 2021). The Soviets planned to launch their massive host straight into the Polish line while a second army marched northwest to turn and hit the Polish flank and crush them. But at midnight of August 14, the Polish 203rd Uhlan Regiment broke through Soviet lines and captured a Russian radio tower. Instead of destroying it, the Polish forces opted to disrupt a greater area of communication by transmitting a code of their own to scramble all Soviet communications. But what code did they transmit? Why the Book of Genesis of course! The Polish transmitted the Book of Genesis over the radio, in morse code, thereby sabotaging the Red Army's orders to the flanking force. The far-right wing of the Soviet army missed the order to turn and attack the Poles and instead just continued marching west (Moyski, 2020).

General Tukhachevsky, who was once again commanding the invasion, had another thing to worry about. The other Russian officers had become overconfident and believed that there was no longer any chance of losing the war. This allowed political rivalries to surface and the priorities of commanders

shifted to gaining political influence through military success rather than finishing off the Polish forces quickly. However, the defenders of Warsaw still held strong and the flanking force had not attacked as ordered, and now even his subordinates would not obey orders to come to his aid (Moyski, 2020). It was at this time, on the Feast of the Assumption, that Piłsudski attacked, and the rest of the Polish army soon sallied out in support. The Russians were demoralized and put to flight in short order and routed on the Vistula River (Suski, 2020).

The battle was a miraculous and decisive victory over the Soviet army and paved the way towards a great Polish victory in the war. The Soviets fled back to their own territory, pursued and beaten all the way through Poland by the Polish army, as well as local partisans. In October an official peace was signed and Lenin and Trotsky abandoned their immediate plans of a Communist hegemony in Europe and agreed to peace with Poland (The miracle on the vistula 2020). The Polish army had also greatly increased its own military strength with the capture of numerous artillery pieces and machine-guns which the Soviets had abandoned in their frantic retreat.

With the conclusion of this conflict, Europe was saved from a bloody conquest by the East. The Soviet threat would one day return but for the time being, Poland was saved from foreign conquest. The victory of Poland over the Soviets prevented many terrible things from occurring, but it also allowed religious success as well as military success. One of the most famous religious figures of the modern era was born in the midst of this conflict and would come to be known as John Paul II (*Pope John Paul II born* 2009). His father served in the Polish army and he grew up in the aftermath of this conflict (*Officer Wojtyła - the father* 2019). Had Poland lost, the Church itself could have ended up very different today, even if the Russians did not end up making it as far as the Vatican. In addition, this victory cemented the nationalism of the Polish people, and the victory itself would continue to inspire the people of Poland for decades to come. Whether against the Nazis or the Soviets, they continued to look up to the examples of the heroes of the Vistula and never gave in to their oppressors.

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