THE BATTLE OF HÁMRE (3rd August 1708)

The Historical Context of the Battle of Hámre

The battle of Hámre (also called the Battle at Trenčín) took place on 3rd August 1708 and was the biggest and the most important of armed engagements between the Francis II. Rákoczi’s insurgent Kurutz army, and General Siegbert Heister’s Habsburg Imperial Army.

In the summer 1708, Rákoczi decided to organize a military campaign to Silesia. The aim of this expedition was to prepare the way for the Prussian prince to be installed on the Hungarian throne and at the same time to encourage Silesian Protestants to revolt against the Habsburgs.

Rákoczi’s original intention – to take over the fortress of Leopoldov – was thwarted due to protests of his staff officers who had suggested seizing Trenčín (German Trentschin or Hungarian Trencsén) and the Trenčín Castle. Influenced by his subordinates, Rákoczi agreed to conquer both locations. As a consequence, the Kurutz troops of about 14 – 15 000 men (approximately 8 000 infantry and 7 000 cavalry) set off up the valley of the Váh river to the north through Beckov to Trenčín. There the Kurutz commander-in-chief planned to cross the border of Moravia and continue onwards to the north – to Silesia.

Learning about Rákoczi’s moves, the supreme commander of the Habsburg Imperial Army in Hungary, General Heister, set out from Bratislava (then German Pressburg or Hungarian Poszony) for Trenčín. Only the Imperial cavalry fought in the engagement against the insurgents at Hámre.

The Battlefield – Its Position and Brief Characteristics

The battle at Hámre took place in the parts of the villages of Mnichova Lehota, Trenčianska Turná and Soblahov, covering the area of about 9.5 sq. kilometres. The operational area of the Habsburg Imperial and insurgent Kurutz army was larger (about 16 sq. kilometres). It extended to Rozvadze, Sedličná, Veľké Bierovce, and Belá situated south-south-west of Trenčín (Fig. 1).
Fig. 1. The battlefield and its surroundings near Trenčín

Fig. 2 shows what the battlefield looked like about 62 years after the battle. There are two different types of terrain: fluvial flat terrain of the Váh river floodplains and a basin hill-country.

The flat terrain on the left bank of the Váh river between the villages of Belá and Trenčianska Turná enables more or less smooth conduct of military operations. The landscape allows a clear and distant sight. On the other side, the flatland without any larger natural obstacles enables an enemy to attempt outflanking moves or attacks from the rear. And it is nearly impossible to carry out unsighted moves of particular parts of fighting forces.

The essential part of the battle took place in the hills. This part of the area is less suitable for conducting military operations. The placement of the Kurutz army was chosen with regards to the undulating ground interweaved with ravines and swampy brook floodplains (see Fig. 2).

The dynamics of this hilly landscape hinders visibility. However, raised edges of the hill-country enabled the insurgents to view the actual situation and allowed them to cover particular sections of the battlefield with effective artillery and firearms fire. Wet and sporadically swampy passages of floodplains were dividing positions of the enemy armies and at the same time presenting potential obstacles for cavalry and infantry manoeuvres. Side moves of Rákoczi’s insurgent army were hard to execute by the system of parallel ravines and gullies (e.g. Dolnácká cesta). On the other hand, these natural barriers made it impossible to develop any attack against the left flank of the Kurutz army.

Narrow and unkept earthfill dams of former ponds are not in the old maps from 1769/72. Near them, in the lowered passages of the floodplains, there were sloppy areas resembling swamps.
Before the Battle...

Before dark on 31st July, the insurgent Kurutz army reached the villages of Rakoľuby and Beckov where on Thursday 1st August they rested. In the afternoon of Friday 2nd August, Rákoczi, accompanied by his staff officers, set out for Trenčín with intentions to find suitable overnight quarters for his troops. Around 4 PM, the insurgents reached the village of Veľké Bierovce and they stopped and rested by the river Váh. Later, at about 9 PM, the Kurutz took up positions in the undulating terrain of the hill-country between the villages of Sedličná, Trenčianska Turná, Hámare, Mnichova Lehota and Soblahov.

The Battle

Following the night in the vicinity of the village of Beckov, on Saturday 3rd August 1708 at dawn, two marching streams of the “Labants” (a period Hungarian denotation for Imperial soldiers), led by General Heister, began to move towards Trenčín. However, at the village of Rozvadze advanced patrols of the Imperial vanguard came across a patrol of insurgents (about
150 cavalrymen). The Kurutz fired away in order to signalize danger to Rákoczi’s camp. This enabled the insurgent army to swiftly take the order of the battle (Fig. 3).

Shortly after 6 AM a group of dragoons separated from the second imperial column and dismounted east of the village of Malé Stankovce and Sedličná. From there they advanced against the village of Trenčianska Turná. As soon as they reached the gully of “Dolnácká cesta”, they opened fire at the Kurutz infantry on the left wing (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – above). After finishing this mission, the dragoons re-joined their troops.

Meanwhile, both columns of Heister’s troops joined together and out of firing range of the Kurutz (between 6 AM and 7 AM) bypassed the left flank of the insurgents between the villages of Trenčín and Belá and arrived in front of the centre of their position. There they made a 90-degree turn on the march and broke the battle line, previously formed in the fields behind the village of Sedličná, again into marching columns (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – above).

During that manoeuvre, Heister observed the Kurutz forces placed on the slopes and ridges of the hill-country. Shortly before 7 AM he decided to pull back along the road to the north towards Trenčín (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – above). The intention of these movements was obviously to lure the insurgents out of their defensive position and to make them attack the Imperial troops.

Mistakenly convinced that the Imperial columns were drawing back, at 7 AM Rákoczi ordered Pekry’s cavalry on his right wing to charge in order to fall in the rear of the “retreating” Imperial units. At the same time he ordered his artillery to support the cavalry charge. Meanwhile, a few battalions of the Kurutz infantry descended from the slopes of the hill-country to the village of Hámre where there they hid on the north edge of the village (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – centre).

The terrain of the basin hill-country south-west and west of the village of Soblahov, where about 6 to 7 thousand Kurutz cavalrymen were to attack the Imperial soldiers, was suitable for such manoeuvres. The only natural obstacle for the attackers represented widened lowland of the Soblahov brook with two wetlands below the village. These wet areas were broken by an earthfill dam of a former pond (Fig. 3).
Pekry wanted to immediately attack the Imperial cavalry heading north towards Trenčín. Therefore he couldn’t lose any time evading wetlands at the Soblahov brook. In addition, along the narrow embankment the riders had to pass one by one, at the most in pairs. Due to this slowdown, the Kurutz lost the crucial moment of surprise. At around 7:10 AM the first part of Pekry’s troops reached the other side of the brook along the dam where they started to develop into a combat formation (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – centre). However, Stephan Ebeczky reminded Pekry that in case of necessity to retreat a reverse movement of his cavalry would be very risky. Pekry hesitated and confusedly ordered withdrawal along the embankment. The retreating front ranks mixed with the incoming ones and thus all the formation lost any ability to manoeuvre (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – centre).

While Johann Pálffy, the commander of the Imperial cavalry, observed Pekry’s doubtful manoeuvre at the dam, he immediately decided to take advantage of the chaos in the enemy’s ranks. He briefly conferred with Heister and after crossing the brook of Soblahov at about 7:20 AM he counter-attacked with his dragoons (Althann regiment) supported by Serbian hussars of the Dimitrović regiment. Pálffy’s cavalry, without any serious difficulties, crossed the low land of the Soblahov brook and there, at about 7:20 AM, enemy forces clashed (Fig. 3 + Fig. 5 – below). The first attack of the imperial cavalry was beaten back by the insurgents, but the second one (which lasted for about 15 minutes) they could not withstand. At about 8 AM the rest of the Kurutz cavalry, being in hot pursuit by Pálffy’s squadrons, were galloping in panic towards the village of Mnichova Lehota, respectively to the forests between Soblahov and Mnichova Lehota (Fig. 4 + Fig. 6 - above).

![Fig 4. The battle of Hámre – situation after 8 AM](image)

Between 8 AM and 9 AM, nearly simultaneously with the last phase of Pálffy’s attack, Heister stopped his move towards Trenčín and his main power struck against the centre of the enemy position at Hámre where immediately a heavy and for the time being drawn battle started (Fig. 4 + Fig. 6 – centre).

The insurgent infantry on the right flank wasn’t able to hold Pálffy’s cavalry anymore. Therefore, Rákoczi sent them a unit of German and Polish carabineers from his so-far intact centre for help (Fig. 4 + Fig. 6 – below) but they were not able to stop the onslaught of the Imperial cavalry. In the most critical part of the battlefield, Rákoczi wanted to try to reverse
the course of the battle by his personal presence and stop the Kurutz retreat (Fig. 4 + Fig. 7 – above). While jumping over a ditch his horse tripped and fell. Lightly wounded, the commander of the insurgent army was lying unconscious under his dead horse. A panicked message about his death immediately spread among his soldiers. Most of the troops that had been fighting by then, started spontaneously to move out of the battle line to the south and south-east to the forests of Považský Inovec Mts.

In the final phase of the battle (before 11 AM), only the units in the centre of the Kurutz formation withstood the Imperial forces (Fig. 4 + Fig. 7 – below). Rákoczi himself wasn´t captured thanks to the bravery of his household troops who got him on a horse and carried to the close forest.

Around 11 AM Heister´s forces defeated the last resisting troops of the Kurutz. The battle at Hámre was over.
Reconstruction of the battle of Hámre
(situation development from 5 AM to ca. 7:20 AM – view of the north)
Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the battle of Hámre  
(situation development from ca. 7:40 AM to ca. 10 AM – view of the north)
After the Battle...

News about the defeat of Rákoczi’s troops at Hámre was published on 6th August in Kurutz newspaper “Mercurius Veridicus ex Hungaria” (“True messenger of Hungary”). There the result of the armed engagement between the Kurutz and the Imperial forces has been described as a misadventure.
A misadventure? In the battle of Hámre about 3,000 to 3,500 Kurutz lost their lives and about 600 were captured (including 25 officers). Along with an unknown number of deserters the total loss of the insurgents reached 21 to 27%. Heister’s army lost about 200 men which represented loss of just 2.3%. But his soldiers gained rich loot: 10 Kurutz cannons, 4 mortars, train waggons with supplies and ammunition, 40 to 50 flags and two kettledrums. During the battle the village of Hámre was entirely destroyed by fire and parts of Trenčianska Turná and Mníchova Lehota were also destroyed.

At Hámre the Kurutz army, to which Rákóczi had devoted considerable attention and economic sources, was defeated. After the battle the infantry was nearly completely destroyed, and elite cavalry units also suffered heavy losses. The loss of French military advisors, who mostly died, showed as an irreplaceable one, too. A few dozens of Kurutz mercenaries entered the Habsburg service following the battle. Rákóczi’s defeat had a strong negative impact on the morale of his supporters in the ranks of Hungarian nobility and subjects as well.

The battle of Hámre fundamentally contributed towards the rapid regression of the Kurutz movement that came to an end with the capitulation at Maiten Field near Szatmár (modern-day Satu Mare in Romania) in 1711.