Battle of Zalgiris (Grunwald) 15 July 1410

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Painting of Battle of Grunwald by Jan Matejko (1878)

The Battle of Zalgiris (or Battle of Grunwald or First Battle of Tannenberg) was fought on 15 July 1410 during the Polish–Lithuanian–Teutonic War.

The alliance of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, led respectively by King Wladyslaw II Jagiello (Jogaila) and Grand Duke Vytautas, decisively defeated the German–Prussian Teutonic Knights, led by Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen. Most of the Teutonic Knights' leadership were killed or taken prisoner. The knights, would never recover their former power, and the financial burden of war reparations caused internal conflicts and an economic downturn in the lands under their control.

In the early morning of 15 July, both armies met in an area covering approximately 4 km2 (1.5 sq mi) between the villages of Grunwald, Tannenberg and Ludwigsdorf. The armies formed opposing lines along a northeast–southwest axis. The Polish–Lithuanian army was positioned in front and east of Ludwigsdorf and Tannenberg.

Polish heavy cavalry formed the left flank, Lithuanian light cavalry the right flank and various mercenary troops made up the centre. The Teutonic forces concentrated their elite heavy cavalry, commanded by Grand Marshal Frederic von Wallenrode, against the Lithuanians. The Knights, who were the first to organize their army for the battle, hoped to provoke the Poles or Lithuanians into attacking first. Their troops, wearing heavy armour, had to stand in the scorching sun for several hours waiting for an attack. As Vytautas delayed, the Grand Master sent messengers with two swords to "assist Wladysław II Jagiello and Vytautas in battle". The swords were meant as an insult and a provocation.

Vytautas, supported by the Polish banners, started an assault on the left flank of the Teutonic forces. After more than an hour of heavy fighting, the Lithuanian light cavalry began a full retreat. The retreat had been a planned manoeuvre borrowed from the Golden Horde. A feigned retreat had been used in the Battle of the Vorskla River (1399), when the Lithuanian army had been dealt a crushing defeat and Vytautas himself had barely escaped alive.

While the Lithuanians were retreating, heavy fighting broke out between Polish and Teutonic forces. Commanded by Grand Komtur Kuno von Lichtenstein, the Teutonic forces concentrated on the Polish right flank. Six of von Walenrode's banners did not pursue the retreating Lithuanians, instead joining the attack on the right flank.

At that time the reorganized Lithuanians returned to the battle, attacking von Jungingen from the rear. The Teutonic forces were by then becoming outnumbered by the mass of Polish knights and advancing Lithuanian cavalry. Surrounded and leaderless, the Teutonic Knights began to retreat. The knights attempted to build a wagon fort: The camp was surrounded by wagons serving as an improvised fortification. However, the defence was soon broken, and the camp was ravaged. According to Cronica conflictus, more Knights died there than on the battlefield. The battle lasted for about ten hours.

The battle was one of the largest in medieval Europe and is regarded as one of the most important victories in the histories of Poland and Lithuania and is also widely celebrated in Belarus. The battle shifted the balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe and marked the rise of the Polish–Lithuanian union as the dominant political and military force in the region.

In Lithuania, the victory is synonymous with the Grand Duchy's political and military peak. It was a source of national pride during the age of Romantic nationalism and inspired resistance to the Germanization and Russification policies of the German and Russian Empires. The Knights were portrayed as bloodthirsty invaders and Grunwald as a just victory achieved by a small, oppressed nation.