

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The Greater Poland victory 1918/1919

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The Greater Poland Uprising in the years 1918-1919 was a Polish national uprising. It is one of the most important events in the history of Greater Poland. It also became an element of the patriotic tradition of the inhabitants of this region. The Greater Poland inhabitants participated in all the military efforts of the 19th century, making both human and material sacrifices. As well as their military efforts, a significant role was played by organic work which established strong economic foundations for the Polish community. The uprising was prepared in

moral terms and therefore it was a natural consequence of the persistent patriotic-natural work. The Poznań residents skilfully combined both, military abilities and good management with a sense of organisation and discipline. Making the most of the favourable moment of the development of events on the international arena, they liberated most of the Greater Poland region with weapons in their hands.

On the way to the uprising

In November 1918, shots on all fronts of the First World War subsided. Three partitioning countries were defeated, which meant the rebirth of Poland for Poles. The euphoric mood was felt in Cracow, Lublin and Warsaw, but not in Poznań. The experience which the Greater Poland inhabitants did share, however, was that of disappointment. They had rather expected that, after Germany's defeat, the Polish western territories would re-join the Motherland. The armistice signed on 11 November 1918 in Compiegne provided for a return to the borders on 1 August 1914. Greater Poland would still remain part of Germany, and the fate of this region was to be determined by a peace conference. The German units, who had stayed here for over one hundred years, were returning from the front. Also the Greater Poland inhabitants were coming back to their homeland. Some of them became involved in the activities of clandestine or legal military organisations. In general, they had a lot of wartime experience and still preserved high military abilities.

In the situation characterised by the revolutionary chaos that encompassed Germany, the Greater

Poland inhabitants did not simply wring their hands. There were three centres of power which functioned in parallel: the Prussian administration, which was working on a continuous basis, the soldier and worker councils and the Polish people's councils, the latter elected their own representation in the form of the Supreme People's Council during the proceedings of the Partition Sejm of Poznań (3-5 December 1918). The politicians from Greater Poland, mainly national democrats, took into consideration the outbreak of the uprising, which would even cover the whole Polish territory of the Prussian partition. In this case, it was hoped that the Polish Army in France (General Józef Haller) and the armies of the Entente state would provide the much needed help. They were supposed to arrive in Gdańsk by sea and move towards the south. According to the plan, the Uprising was to break out in Poznań, Inowrocław and Ostrów Wielkopolski after they had reached Toruń. Initially the landing of the troops was planned on 19 December 1918, then it was postponed to the end of December and ultimately to the middle of January 1919. The discovery of the Polish plans related to the Polish Army in France was used by the Germans as an anti-Polish argument in the international arena. This fact was also eagerly used by the English who did not wish to strengthen Poland as an ally of France in the Baltic Sea region and rejected the plan of a naval expedition to Gdańsk. They effectively frustrated the plans of Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Roman Dmowski, Wojciech Korfanty and the Poznań leaders.

The Poles already had their own paramilitary forces at their disposal. Before the outbreak of the uprising, about 8000-10000 volunteers, ready to fight, were deployed in different units within the Greater Poland region. The most numerous formations, whose organisation resembled military units, existed in Poznań. These included the legally functioning companies of the People's Guard (PG) and the Guard and Security Services (Wach-und Sicherheitsdienst, GSS) organised at the end of November 1918 with the consent of the authorities in Berlin. The latter, as the emperor's army was in complete degradation, were to be on guard duty in the respective garrisons. As a result of skilfully conducted recruitment activities, the Guard and Security Service became a strictly Polish organisation. Although a German officer, Lieutenant Colonel Dobschutz, was officially the commander of this formation in Poznań, in practice it was commanded by Second Lieutenant Mieczysław Paluch. The Poznań-based companies of the GSS consisted of about 2000 soldiers on the first day of the uprising. In addition to the capital city of Greater Poland, other companies were also established in other garrison cities such as Jarocin, Kórnik, Pleszew, Środa Wielkopolska, Wielichowo and Września.

The People's Guard was a local formation and was subject to the local people's councils. The soldiers of the People's Guard were mainly recruited from members of the Polish Gymnastic Society "Sokół", and its commander was Julian Lange - the head of the Guard. At the beginning of December 1918, units of the People's Guard were present in 30 out of 42 poviats of the Poznań province, whereby

some of these units were armed. Above all, they were organised in places where the Polish population was dominant.

The most radical independence organisation which strived for military settlements was the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition (PMOPP) (commander: Wincenty Wierzejewski), loosely linked to the Polish Military Organisation in the Polish Kingdom. For the most part it was composed of scouts and deserters. Though at the beginning of November 1918, it consisted of hardly 200 members, it contributed significantly to the successes during the first days of the uprising. Furthermore, about one thousand members of scout groups, independent military groups and Greater Poland border units, (the battalion in Szczypiorno) organised within the Congress Kingdom, were preparing for the uprising.

The first hours and days were the most important.

On 26 December 1918, an enthusiastic welcome was given to Ignacy Jan Paderewski in Poznań. The following day brought quite unexpected events to the leaders of the Polish independence movement, who had rather planned for any military efforts at a later time. The general initial plans of the Secret Military Staff, organised by Bohdan Hulewicz and Mieczysław Paluch, did not manage to reach the stage of maturity necessary to be implemented. In response to the Polish demonstrations, the Germans decided to manifest their presence in Poznań by organising their own march in the afternoon of 27 December 1918. It was headed by soldiers of the local garrison and

marched to the Bazar hotel, where I. J. Paderewski was accommodated together with the allied mission. The alarmed companies of the People's Guard and the Guard and Security Service restored law and order in the city. According to a report by the head of the British military mission, Colonel Harry Herschel Wade, in Poznań on 27 December 1918, the Polish and allied flags placed on the Bazar hotel, where I. J. Paderewski and the allied mission were accommodated, were removed.

The first shots in the vicinity of the Bazar hotel were fired at around 5.00 p.m. Thus far, it has still not been possible to clearly determine who opened fire first; whether it was German soldiers from the 6th Grenadier Regiment or the Poles who protected Paderewski's place of accommodation. Preserved accounts of the participants mention the German participants of the march firing shots into the air from revolvers. When the next Polish sub-units arrived at William's Square (Wolności Square), the Germans retreated to the building of the Museum, next to the Bazar Hotel, and then towards the building of the Police Headquarters. Spontaneously and without any central management of the Polish action, units of the Guard and Security Service and the People's Guard started to drive the Germans out of the city centre. The arsenal at Wielkie Garbary, the buildings of the post office, the regency building and the main railway station were all occupied.

In many locations of the city, bilateral shootings took place, including at such sites as Chwaliszewo bridge, the area next to the municipal gasworks

at Ogrodowa and Zielona Streets and during an attempt to take control of the barracks of the 6th Grenadier Regiment on Bukowska Street. A company of the GSS, commanded by Second Lieutenant Edmund Krause, at the intersection of Berlińska Street and Rycerska Street (F. Ratajczaka Street), was shot at by Germans from a machine gun located at the entrance to the Police Headquarters. The head of this company, Sergeant Franciszek Ratajczak was severely wounded, and having been taken to the garrison hospital, he died during surgery.

The red and white flags on the streets in Poznań, as well as the French, British and American flags hanging in honour of the allies, made the Germans living in the city indignant and became a pretext that triggered riots. The removal of Polish and allied symbols by the German counter-demonstration was the primary reason for the commencement of fighting in the centre of Poznań. Thus, the spontaneous, or provoked, activities of the German soldiers and civilians were quickly and effectively suppressed by the Poles. Consequently, this led to the undertaking of insurgent activities by the Greater Poland inhabitants.

During the following days, the Citadel, the barracks of the 47th regiment of infantry, artillery, sappers, rolling stock and cavalry, as well as Fort Grolman, were occupied. In this situation, the Germans were not able to take effective steps aimed at nipping the uprising in the bud. They did not shake off the surprise, and additionally, they were not aware of the size of Polish formations. The disorganisation of the

German reaction was even further exacerbated by the arrest of the command of the 5th Army Corps and the highest-ranking German officials. The Germans were now deprived of military and civil leadership. As early as the evening of 28 December, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council appointed Captain Stanisław Taczak temporary commander of the uprising, after consultations with Józef Piłsudski.

The occupation of Poznań and the barracks situated in its vicinity (the Sołacz barracks, the air base in Ławica and the training camp in Biedrusko) by the previously prepared, organised and armed Polish units was undoubtedly a military success, but also a success for morale. Poznań was taken with few losses (8 dead and about 20 wounded).

The outbreak of fighting in Poznań became a signal to take insurgent action in Greater Poland. The first volunteer units consisting of, more often than not, inhabitants of a single town were formed quickly and spontaneously. Most frequently, the commander was appointed by way of a democratic election; the organisational forms to which everyone was used to on the front in the German army were adopted. Initially, there were no units which would resemble any specific formation. Battalions and companies with assigned territorial names started operating, that is, Gołańcz company, Stęszew company, Powidz company, the Śrem battalion and the Gniezno battalion.

Volunteer units, including a battalion from the Western-Poznań powiat (Second Lieutenant

Andrzej Kopa), companies from: Czarniejewo (Sergeant Franciszek Złotowicz), Kórnik (Second Lieutenant. Stanisław Celichowski), Śrem (Second Lieutenant Alfred Milewski) and Pleszew (Second Lieutenant Feliks Pamin) came to the aid of the capital city of Greater Poland. The insurgent movement expanded towards the east and south-east up to the border of the former Russian partition. Września, Gniezno and Witkowo were liberated and German expedition units, sent from Bydgoszcz to Gniezno (400 soldiers, one artillery battery and 30 machine guns), were stopped near Łopienno and Zdziechowa on 30-31 December. The battle of Zdziechowa was the first major clash of the insurgents in field conditions. It was of key significance for the development of the uprising in the Gniezno powiat. The defeated Grenschutz group could have threatened Poznań in the event of victory. After this success, the Gniezno participants started to think about attacking Kuyavia and Bydgoszcz. A volunteer unit commanded by Second Lieutenant Paweł Cymś set off on 1 January 1919. This action activated the volunteer units from Trzemeszno, Kruszwica, Mogilno and Strzelno. Over 900 people participated in the bloody fighting for Inowrocław (5-6 January 1919) - including two companies of the Polish Army which arrived from Włocławek. The city was liberated with relatively high losses: 47 dead soldiers and 5 civilians, and about 120 wounded people. In the case of the Germans there were 14 dead and an unknown number of wounded.

In the northern part of Greater Poland, the Uprising expanded in several directions: from

Wągrowiec, Oborniki, Rogoźno to Kcynia and Chodzież; from Nakło and Gołańcz to Mroczka, Wysoka and Ślesin. The Września and Gniezno companies left for Żnin and Szubin. Battles were fought with varying degrees of success. The first offensive of the insurgents, directed at Szubin (8 January 1919), ended in complete failure and high losses. 23 dead, over 20 wounded and 92 taken prisoner. The main reason for the defeat was the lack of coordinated command and poor cooperation between the companies of the insurgents as well as the poor skills of the commanders to manoeuvre the battle. The fact that the initiative was now on the side of Germans in this region inhibited the fighting in north-eastern Greater Poland. As Lieutenant Colonel Kazimierz Grudzielski, who commanded the insurgent units in this direction, saw the growing threat, as early as 8 January, he requested aid from Central Command in Poznań. There, with the knowledge of Major Stanisław Taczak and owing to efforts made by Lieutenant Colonel Juliusz Stachiewicz, Second Lieutenant Mieczysław Paluch and Second Lieutenant Władysław Zakrzewski, a volunteer emergency expedition group was organised. 2000 insurgents were under the command of Lieutenant Colonel K. Grudzielski, including 5 officers, 60 non-commissioned officers, 14 heavy machine guns, 8 cannons and one cavalry squadron. This time, the offensive, i.e. the second battle of Szubin (11-12 January 1919) ended in success and the repulsion of the Germans from Żnin, Łabiszyn and Złotniki Kujawskie. The insurgents liberated the entire north-eastern Greater Poland region, defending their positions along the Noteć River line. They

broke the German transportation lines running west from Bydgoszcz. This opened up the possibility of developing an attack in the direction of Pomerania. However, any further offensive to the north was put on hold. The reason for this was a Polish-German agreement which allowed for the withdrawal of units from Belarus to Germany.

In Greater Poland, it was Grodzisk which played the role of coordination centre. Here, action was taken to liberate the area to the west of the Warta River. The most urgent objective for the insurgents, under the command of Kazimierz Zenkteler, was the reaching of the Odra River line and the Zbąszyń lakes and to cut the railway connections running from Berlin and Krzyż to Greater Poland. Rakoniewice, Wolsztyn and Nowy Tomysł were occupied. Fierce unsuccessful battles for Zbąszyń and Miedzychód took place on 4-5 January 1919. Central Command in Poznań banned the insurgents from crossing the Odra River line. The pressure to issue this decision was exerted by the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council which was motivated to it by political considerations.

The power in the Kościan and Gostyń poviats was taken over until 30 December 1919. The lack of determination in the local People's Councils to act quickly was taken advantage of by the Germans. They formed volunteer battalions in Leszno and Rawicz, and also received reinforcements from Wrocław and Głogów. It was not until 6 January that an insurgent battalion, commanded by Second Lieutenant Bernard Śliwiński, set off from Gostyń to Leszno. Kąkolewo, Osieczna and Pawłowice, among other towns, were occupied,

which allowed for the obtaining of connections on the flanks with the Western and Southern section of the frontline. In the south of Greater Poland, insurgent operations were initiated by the Border Battalion from Szczypiorno, which consisted of volunteers from Ostrów. It was supported by volunteer units from Jarocin, Ostrzeszów and Pleszew. This frontline section was commanded by Second Lieutenant Władysław Wawrzyniak. On 31 December 1918, Krotoszyn and Ostrów Wielkopolski were occupied. The insurgent operation was concentrated in Jutrosin and Miejska Górka (Second Lieutenant Ignacy Busza).

Initially, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council tried to negotiate with the Germans. For a week it reassured the authorities in Berlin that it was in control of the situation, claiming that these were just some local riots. On 3 January 1919, the Supreme People's Council adopted a resolution on taking over power in the Poznań region. However, the German authorities were not informed of this fact until five days later. This changed the situation of Central Command (CC), which had so far operated covertly, that is, in the rear part of the Royal Hotel at Św. Marcin Street. Several officers from their staff wore civilian clothes instead of uniforms. Central Command did not disclose its activities until 5 January, when it issued its first Day Order. The territory of Greater Poland was divided into 9 military districts. During the first ten days, the operations of the volunteer units had the characteristics of irregular operations. They took place spontaneously according to local possibilities and had their own history. The

simplest activities were conducted with the best results.

The seizure of power in the poviat cities was generally tantamount to taking control of the entire poviat. In situations where the Germans took steps to push the insurgents out and jeopardised the Polish territorial acquisitions, volunteers from neighbouring cities came to each other's aid (e.g. Września and Gniezno). The units were consolidated and relied upon ad hoc preparation of plans, the commanders took offensive action which in a way resembled raids.

The insurgent operations during the first days were characterised by a great vitality but also a lack of experience in command. These shortcomings were partly compensated by the strong will to fight and the patriotism of the volunteers. On many occasions, mistakes committed on the battlefield led to tragic consequences. They sometimes ended in the death of their commanders, as was the case with Korneliusz Mann, Edmund Krause and Władysław Wiewiórkowski, to name a few.

After several days of the Uprising, a group of commanders emerged, who, despite their low military ranks (lieutenants and sergeants), coped really well in posts which would normally be occupied by higher-ranking officers. These were, among others: Edmund Bartkowski, Paweł Cymś, Konrad Gołniewicz, Bohdan Hulewicz, Andrzej Kopa, Włodzimierz Kowalski, Ignacy Mielżyński, Zdzisław Orłowski, Mieczysław Paluch, Edmund Rogalski, Stanisław Siuda, Kazimierz Szcześniak, Bernard Śliwiński and Kazimierz Zenkteler.

During the first two weeks of the Uprising, the number of volunteer units was very fluid. In many villages and towns the volunteers would just return home after having performed their tasks. In the case of another task, volunteers were recruited again. According to the so far incomplete estimates, the volunteer formations on the front consisted of about 9000 - 10000 insurgents. In the middle of January 1919, these forces rose to 14000 volunteers.

Major Stanisław Taczak, understanding the specifics of volunteer units, based the organisation of the army on a territorial structure. Officially he did not interfere with the internal life of the units, and the volunteers would often choose their own commanders, addressing each other with the word "comrade", based on experience earned in the "Sokół" organisation.

The Greater Poland Army and the defence of the Uprising's achievements

The success of the Uprising and the military organisational achievements were largely determined by the successive commanders-in-chief: Major Stanisław Taczak, General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki and the officer corps. It was actually Major S. Taczak who established the organisational foundations of the Uprising and the front that shielded the liberated territories. On the other hand, General J. Dowbor-Muśnicki was responsible for turning the insurgent units into a regular army, based on compulsory conscription. Professional officers, especially his subordinates from the former 1st Corps, constituted the foundation of the officer corps.

The formation was composed of three infantry divisions, one cavalry brigade, three artillery brigades, technical units (sappers, telegraphic, railway and motorised units), gendarmerie, and also sanitary, veterinary, judiciary and pastoral services.

The Greater Poland line of defence was divided into four internal fronts (from 19 February, only three) and their corresponding Military Districts. Inspectorates of the respective arms were established: infantry - Second Lieutenant General Kazimierz Grudzielski, artillery - Colonel Anatol Kędzierski, air forces - Colonel Gustaw Macewicz, technical units - Colonel Jan Skoryna, sanitary services - Second Lieutenant General Ireneusz Wierzejewski and National Defence - Colonel Julian Bolesław Lange.

Within the structures of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, there was the Military Division which fulfilled the function of a local "ministry of war". This body was managed by Second Lieutenant General Kazimierz Raszewski, a former colonel lieutenant of the Prussian army hussars. As a confidante of the Supreme People's Council, he fulfilled the role of "controller" of the activities undertaken by Dowbor-Muśnicki.

At the beginning of February 1919, the Germans proceeded with an offensive along the entire length of the front. The Polish command in this area focused on running a mobile defence. The places where the Germans would attack were not fully known, therefore, relatively strong reserves were organised. The toughest battles were fought on the Northern and Western Fronts. Some of the

towns were passed back and forth several times (Rynarzewo). The fighting on the Western Front, where the Germans attacked the insurgents along the Międzychód section took a very dramatic course. The Germans managed to seize Babimost and Kargowa. After several days of heavy battles, the German attack was halted along the line of the Zbąszyń lakes. Despite the fact that the Germans significantly outnumbered the Poles, both in terms of people and equipment, they did not manage to achieve their objectives.

Attempts to anticipate the German offensive on the Southern Front ended in failure. Two Polish attacks on Rawicz (3 and 5-6 February) came to nothing. The Germans did, however, incur high losses. Their activities in the direction of Krotoszyn (10 February), despite having seized Zduny sometime before, were not successful.

The intensity of the battles did not decrease until the second half of February 1919. Owing to the interventions of Polish diplomacy, the efforts of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council and also support from France, the Germans were forced to stop their military operations (the treaty was signed in Trier on 16 February 1919).

On 3 May 1919, the Greater Poland army presented itself to the people during a great parade at Ławica Airport on the occasion of a national holiday. A strong army was formed and in June 1919 it consisted of about 102000 soldiers, including 70000 as first line troops. The People's Guard had a further 100000 members at its disposal. The expansion of the Greater Poland

armies was linked to the increasing demand for officers. Taking into account their shortage, schools were set up for infantry, artillery and aeronautic (balloon) and National Defence officers.

Approximately 1800 soldiers died as a result of the insurgent battles until the middle of February 1919, and also in the clashes along the armistice line. The greatest number of victims was observed on the Northern Front, where 587 insurgents and soldiers were killed and 101 died of wounds. The Greater Poland Front existed until March 1920. Having considered the losses of the Greater Poland units fighting in Eastern Galicia and on the Lithuanian-Belarusian Front, the number of Greater Poland soldiers who fell or died of their wounds amounts to approximately 2500. At least 5000 more died during the war with Bolshevik Russia in the years 1919-1920 and in the Silesian Uprisings.

At the end of January 1919, homogeneous uniforms were introduced, using huge stocks of German uniforms. A characteristic element which distinguished the Greater Poland soldiers was a high four-cornered cap (rogatywka) made of tawny-grey cloth with a loop in the shape of a club, like that on a playing card, on the left side and red and white ribbons on the band. Also the insignia of the military ranks, worn on the sleeves and the four-cornered caps in the Greater Poland Army, were different. The national symbols which were used by the insurgents and soldiers of the Greater Poland Armies strengthened their belief that they were a part of the reborn Polish Army.

The armistice was signed for a period of six weeks and was later on extended once again. Despite this fact, local skirmishes still took place and the Germans were getting ready for another offensive which was to be headed by Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, born in Poznań. The outbreak and the course of the Uprising was also a correction to the plans of politicians who were forced to accept the policy of *fait accompli*. The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council played a great role in diplomatic efforts, as a result of which the Germans were forced to sign the armistice conditions. This armistice saved Greater Poland from the intervention of the German Ober-Ost armies.

Until the end of May 1919, the Greater Poland Front functioned independently without being operationally subjected to the Supreme Command of the Polish Army in Warsaw. Given the increased threat of a German offensive, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council made an address regarding the "unity of the national army". On 30 May, chief commander Józef Piłsudski confirmed the operational subordination of the Greater Poland armies. The unification work lasted even until November that year.

Significance and final remarks

The peace treaty was signed in Versailles on 28 June. The Greater Poland victory greatly affected the shape of the Polish western border as the borderline covered those territories controlled by the insurgents. Also, thanks to the Polish delegation during the Paris conference and also

the French support, the maximum of everything that could be obtained at that time was achieved. A significant success for Poland was the granting of those territories which were not liberated during the Uprising, including Bydgoszcz, Kępno, Leszno, Rawicz and Zbąszyń.

Despite the fact that the Greater Poland Uprising did not cover all the territories of the Prussian partition, it affected the development of the conspiratorial movement in such regions as Gdańsk Pomerania and Upper Silesia. It also had a huge impact on the shaping of the western and northern border of the 2nd Republic of Poland. The Greater Poland units fought later in Eastern Lesser Poland, on the Lithuanian-Belarusian Front, and above all during the Polish-Bolshevik war in 1920. Experienced officers from Greater Poland contributed to the victory of the 3rd Silesian Uprising in the year 1921.

Greater Poland made a significant contribution to the organisation of the reborn Polish Army. This was a manifestation not only of patriotism but also of organisational efficiency. The Poznań region, as opposed to large territories of the Austrian and Russian partitions, avoided destruction during the wartime operations. It must be emphasised that one sixth of the Polish Army was organised in Greater Poland. About 8% of the people were called to arms, that is, every twelfth inhabitant of the region joined the ranks of the Greater Poland Army. In comparison with other formations of the Polish Army, the Greater Poland units were characterised by good military training, discipline and equipment.

The maintenance of these forces required significant funding. It was not until November 1919 that the Greater Poland Army fell within the competences of the Ministry of Military Affairs in terms of financing. For this purpose, the reserves of the Polish banks and companies were used and the general populace was addressed to grant a 5% Loan for Poland's Rebirth. Until the end of the year 1919, Polish general society in the Poznań region subscribed and paid in 348000000 marks and 12000000 roubles; also gold and silver, with a value reaching 26000000 marks, were given. In May 1919, about 74 000000 marks were spent on the maintenance of the Greater Poland Front. The long lists of donors were published in the Poznań press. General J. Dowbor-Muśnicki highly appreciated the participation of society in the formation of the army. *I would not be able to make even half of what was then called "the high-grade army" if it was not for the support of society.*

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