

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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Political aspects of the Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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Historians, while evaluating the factors which contributed to the success of the Greater Poland Uprising, often emphasise its political aspects. The defeat of the imperial house of Germany and the armistice in Compiègne, as well as the revolution and violent fighting related to it, surprised the German politicians and triggered a change in the configuration caused by the threat of the Bolshevik revolution. At the same time, they were unable to determine whether the reborn Polish state would manage to stop the

Bolsheviks from marching west. Also, the failure of Germany evoked the expectations of the Polish community in Greater Poland, Pomerania and Silesia, however, it did not change the formal-legal situation of these territories. Polish postulates were not included in the ceasefire conditions whose details were discussed during the Paris talks in the period between 2 and 4 November 1918.

Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the supreme commander of the French armies, pressed for the introduction of a provision into the treaty, regarding an obligation by Germany to evacuate "all Polish territories, including the territories of former Poland which were in its possession before the first partition in the year 1772". Decisions were taken at that time, that arrangements regarding the future of Polish territories of the Prussian partition were supposed to be made no sooner than during the peace conference. Talks regarding the signing of the armistice, and later on, the peace treaty with the Germans clearly manifested two stances: the British and the French. The U.S., in turn, acted as mediator. In fact, the Poles could only count on one ally - France and its military forces. The French were aware of the bridging position of Poland in Central Europe and its possible importance in a post-war anti-German alliance. Thus, for these reasons the French politicians and military officials did everything to weaken post-war Germany as much as possible in case of a future conflict.

In November 1918, power in Poland was taken by Józef Piłsudski who appointed the government of

Jędrzej Moraczewski. In this situation, Poland was represented in Paris by Roman Dmowski's Polish National Committee and, in the country, by a government headed by Jędrzej Moraczewski. One of the elements of French policy was to suggest to Roman Dmowski and the Polish National Committee in Paris the creation of *fait accompli* by bringing about the outbreak of an uprising comprising all partitions. Dmowski was promised that he would receive military support in the event of the landing of the perfectly organised and equipped "Blue Army", commanded by General J. Haller. Unfortunately, the strong objection of British diplomacy on the one hand, and probably the poor state of the Polish military preparations within the territory of the partition made this plan unrealistic. Additionally the Polish National Committee, in view of its ties with France, was unacceptable to Great Britain. Being afraid of the French influence in Warsaw, Prime Minister Arthur Balfour decided to grant support to Ignacy Paderewski who arrived in Liverpool by ship on 23 November 1918. The exquisite virtuoso and champion of the Polish cause was an alternative to Roman Dmowski. Instead of the "Blue Army", an allied delegation including Ignacy Paderewski arrived in Gdańsk. He travelled to Warsaw to take the post of prime minister. The British mission was headed by Colonel Harry Herschel Wade, a British military attaché in Copenhagen.

It was possible to change the route of Paderewski's trip to Warsaw and redirect the British mission in such a way as to travel through Poznań. On 26 December at 11.00 Ignacy

Paderewski and Wojciech Korfanty, together with the British mission, travelled through Piła to Poznań by train. Although the Germans, first by means of a telegram and then directly in Rogoźno, tried to make the mission travel directly to Warsaw, the uncompromising attitudes of I. J. Paderewski and Colonel H. Wade negated this intention. Luckily, the train reached the capital city of Greater Poland and its passengers met with the enthusiastic reception of the Poznań inhabitants.

The above-mentioned aspect of the Polish-French relations from November and December 1918 was clearly visible during the international conference at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, attended by French historians who represented, above all, the Paris Sorbonne. Incidentally, a thorough investigation of the files collected by French intelligence may be a source of very interesting information on this issue.

Researchers who deal with the Uprising agree that, though its outbreak in Poznań did not really surprise the leaders of the Poznań centre, it surely frustrated the plans of its decision-making centre - the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, which was composed of the following persons: Priest Stanisław Adamski, Wojciech Korfanty and Adam Poszwiński. The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council had planned to win the best possible conditions for the Prussian partition during the treaty negotiations. After the outbreak of the Uprising, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council did not take over power in the Poznań region immediately. For some days, the Poznań

politicians made attempts at reaching an agreement with the Germans, however, at the same time, assuming that these negotiations would end in a fiasco they had prepared themselves to take over the power in the territories of the partition, at least in Greater Poland which was engulfed by the Uprising. For these reasons, efforts were focused on the establishment of Central Command and the insurgent military forces.

The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council was organisationally and personally prepared, both for activities at a local level and also in terms of external policy, that is, diplomatic activities. The commissars had presented their objectives as early as 14 November 1918, in an appeal to the general Polish society on the territories of the former Prussian partition. At that time, the assembly of the Partition Sejm of Poznań and elections to the national parliament (Sejm) and powiat, municipal and communal people's councils were announced. The Partition Sejm of Poznań took place on 3-5 December 1918. By resolution of the Parliament, the Supreme People's Council was acknowledged as the legal authority in the Prussian partition. The Supreme People's Council was elected "As our superior authority until the moment that control is taken over our districts by the Polish Government". On top of this, the so far temporary composition of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council was approved. Polish political postulates were formulated, declaring that the range of the Commissariat's authority would cover the entire Prussian partition. As well as this, a further three

members were also elected – Stefan Łaszewski as the representative of Pomerania, Józef Rymer from Silesia and Władysław Seyda. As Zdzisław Grot emphasised, the Commissariat intended to struggle for independence based on the favourable decisions of the Entente states.

Despite this, the formation of military forces was not neglected, that is, in the form of the Citizen's Guard as recognised by the Worker and Soldier Council. It was then renamed the People's Guard on 27 November 1918. It is also necessary to emphasise the establishment of the Guard and Security Service which was dominated by Poles. This was possible owing to the brilliant ploys undertaken by Bohdan Hulewicz and Mieczysław Paluch. The independence work of Wincenty Wierzejewski, as the founder of the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian partition and the organiser of the scout campaign during the period under consideration, should not be forgotten either.

Irrespective of the intentions of the Polish politicians in the former Prussian partition, the Uprising in Poznań and Greater Poland broke out at a very good moment. Berlin was not able to suppress the Poznań rebellion as it did not have enough forces and capacity at its disposal. However, the German politicians faced the looming loss of Greater Poland as the granary of Germany and the loss of Silesia with its resources and industry. In order to get an idea of the situation in Poznań, the German authorities sent a delegation headed by Eugen Ernst and consisting of a group of officials joined by German commanders in Poznań. The Poles were

represented by commissars – Priest Stanisław Adamski and Wojciech Korfanty. There were also representatives of the Executive Division of the Worker and Soldier Council, representatives of people's councils - German and Jewish ones - and representatives of the Police Headquarters. The talks were held on 30 December in the so-called new town hall in Poznań.

Both parties accused each other of provoking the events and of nationalist inclinations. During the talks, it was decided that the German 6th Grenadier Regiment would be allowed to leave Poznań without support weapons, that is, only with weapons for their personal protection. Also interned officials and generals were released. On 1 January 1919, the German delegation returned to Berlin. Major Stanisław Taczak became the temporary chief commander of the Uprising and Jan Maciaszek became the Poznań commandant based on appointment by the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. On 8 January, the post of chief commander of the Uprising was offered to General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki, but Major Taczak continued performing his duties until 16 January.

For the reasons mentioned above, the resolution on taking over the power in the liberated territories was adopted as late as on 3 January 1919, and on 8 January 1919, the Greater Poland Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, by its appeal to the society announced that the Supreme People's Council had taken power in Greater Poland. In the opinion of an expert on this issue, Professor Zbigniew Dworecki, the people's councils undertook diverse administrative activities, among other things, the state and local

government administration, and partially the judiciary, were taken over and necessary personal changes in offices were made, laws and regulations were issued for the legal, administrative and economic separation of the liberated territory of Greater Poland, the Greater Poland Army was established and last, but not least, the documentation for settlements with Germany was prepared, which facilitated the work of the Liquidation Commission.

Activists of the Supreme People's Council and its board, both before and after 8 January 1919, demonstrated high political and administrative activity, gradually breaking the ties which bound the Commissariat to the Berlin centre. By the end of February, the worker and soldier councils were liquidated, which was followed by a winding-up of people's councils and their leaders while commandants of security guards were proposed high official posts. As has been noticed by Henryk Lisiak, the Commissariat also took over the legislative and executive functions and established three sub-commissariats: for Silesia, Pomerania and the Netze district. Also, four divisions started to operate: the National Economy Division (Juliusz Trzciński), the Organisation and Propaganda Division (Priest Józef Prądyński), the above-mentioned Policy and Army Division (Leon Pluciński) and the Administration and Judiciary Division (Wacław Wyczyński).

The political activity in the organisational structure of the Commissariat was the responsibility of Division III – Policy and Army, which was subordinated directly to one of the

most active and most capable commissars – Wojciech Korfanty. The head of the Division was Leon Pluciński, who had three departments under his control: 1. Policy, 2. Refugees, 3. Wartime losses registration

On the other hand, the Warsaw Office of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, which was subordinated to the Central Division, was headed by W. Kręglewski. Also, an office whose task was to prepare materials for the Polish delegation at the peace conference in Paris was established.

When the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council addressed a request to the Chief of State to appoint a commander for the Uprising, Józef Piłsudski recommended General J. Dowbor-Muśnicki. Without delving too much into the motives of the Chief of State, and being aware of the sceptical attitude of the general to the bottom-up character of the Uprising, it is worth noticing, that overall, General Dowbor-Muśnicki proved himself to be the commander who was to transform the poorly integrated, though quite valiant insurgent troops into a regular Greater Poland Army. He also managed to successfully coordinate, in stages, the integration of the Greater Poland units into the Polish Army

At the end of January 1919, the Germans concentrated large forces on the Greater Poland Front and prepared an offensive aimed at the suppression of the Uprising. Both parties demonstrated their obstinacy and will to fight. At the beginning of February, the insurgent army switched to defence, fighting to maintain the

territorial acquisitions from January. The course of battles was dramatic and the respective smaller and bigger towns were passed to and fro. However, in general, the Poles maintained the status quo, while the Germans were not able to make any significant breaches into the territories under Polish control. Yet still the Germans were getting ready for another offensive.

In the meantime, the members of the Commissariat, from the middle of January, being aware of the threat of German offensives, and being concerned with the proper perception of the Greater Poland Uprising by the Entente states, at least from the Polish point of view, were involved in an intense exchange of telegrams with the Polish politicians of the Polish National Committee in Paris. There were hopes that a truce could be called, securing in this way the current military achievements of insurgent armies. In several telegrams to the Polish National Committee, which were quite alarming in tone, the commissars argued that the situation of the Poznań region was difficult in the face of expected German operations. Prof. Stanisław Sierpowski was right to observe that the main indication which justified the interest of the French in the fate of Greater Poland was the risk of the outbreak of war in the east, to which the Polish politicians pointed. Unfortunately, any adjustment of the terms of the armistice, including the considerations of the Poznań region, were not given due attention in January. The German politicians, in their telegrams to the Entente governments, built a falsified picture of events in Greater Poland. For instance, Ulrich

Brockdorff-Rantzau, in his letter to the English government dated 15 January 1919, called the Polish Uprising a “rebellion, a crime against the Homeland and high treason”, and the goals of the insurgents were nothing more than: “the untamed wantonness of Polish imperialism”, stating that: “the German government perceives the current situation as an immense danger which threatens permanent peace in the world”. In response to the statements of the German minister of foreign affairs, which were full of confabulations, on 21 January 1919, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council sent a lengthy letter to the allied governments, in which, point by point, the German arguments were dismissed, discussing widely the lies, half-truths and manipulations.

Next day, the issue of the Greater Poland uprising came to light during the meeting of the Supreme Council of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers. In this discussion, whose participants were, among others: Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, minister Arthur Balfour, Italian minister Sidney Sonnino and U.S President Woodrow Wilson, attention was paid to the fact that the Polish struggles for independence in Greater Poland and other territories of the Prussian partition, demonstrate, on the one hand, a lack of trust in the peace conference, and on the other hand, in the opinion of the gathered participants, they destabilise the concept of the struggle of the reborn Poland with the Bolsheviks. As can be seen, the politicians of the Polish National Committee in Paris, acting in consultation with the Commissariat of the

Supreme People's Council, had a very difficult task to win over the Council of Ten for recognition of the achievements of the Greater Poland Uprising. The future of Greater Poland was uncertain and its fate was not yet sealed. One effect of the meetings held on 22 and 24 January 1919 was the appointment of the inter-allied mission sent to Poland under the leadership of Joseph Noulens, a French politician and diplomat, which was to be of a military and political nature. The main objective of the delegation was to prepare a report on the situation in Poland for the needs of the peace conference. On the other hand, the missions currently present in the Polish territories – the British one headed by Colonel H. Wade and the French one headed by General Berthelemy – were supposed to form a new extended mission. Its aim was to prevent the escalation of the Polish-German conflict.

The German government, in its note to the Entente states of 10 February and in a speech delivered by minister Brockdorff-Rantzau in the National Assembly of 14 February, strongly opposed the presence of the allied mission on its territory and also rejected the allied ban on using force against the Poles. The inter-allied mission arrived in Warsaw in February, and its delegation also undertook observation activity in Greater Poland.

Before the end of the peace conference in Paris, the last political act of the Greater Poland-German war involved the tough negotiations in Trier, Germany, which were held on 14 - 16 February – on the eve of the expiration of the armistice between the Entente states and the

German Reich. The Germans were represented by Minister Erzberger and Kurt von Hammerstein – head of the German armistice commission, and the Entente states by Marshal Foch and General Maxime Weygand – head of the general staff of allied armies. The current version of the armistice treaty was complemented by the provision that the Germans must stop any offensive operations against the Poles. Obviously the Germans expressed their protestations, which at times sounded dramatic, claiming that the Poles demonstrated nationalist zeal and were involved in acts of rebellion or unlawful attacks on the legitimate Prussian troops in Greater Poland. On 15 February, the Council of Ten became familiar with the whole matter, being aware of the true purpose of the offensive conducted by the Germans. This issue was actively commented upon by, among others, Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski.

As a result of the talks in Trier, the armistice between the Entente states and Germany was prolonged with the aid of the Polish National Committee and the Polish government, on 16 February 1919. At the same time the Greater Poland Army was recognised as an allied army.

Pursuant to the armistice signed in Trier, the Germans were to refrain from any military activity. It included an arrangement that “(...) the Germans should immediately stop any offensive operations against the Poles in the Poznań region and in all other districts”.

The treaty delimited a demarcation line, the range of which covered the areas occupied as a

result of insurgent battles: "To this end, German armies must not trespass the following line: the former border of East Prussia and West Prussia with Russia up to Dąbrowa Biskupia, then, starting from this point, west of Dąbrowa Biskupia, west of Nowa Wieś Wielka, south of Brzoza, north of Szubin, north of Kcynia, south of Szamocin, south of Chodzież, north of Czarnków, west of Miały, west of Międzychód, west of Zbąszyń, west of Wolsztyn, north of Leszno, north of Rawicz, south of Krotoszyn, west of Odolanów, west of Ostrzeszów, north of Wieruszów, and from the Silesian border".

The situation in Greater Poland was still tense, and the German armies did not leave the territories granted to Poland. In the second half of February 1919, the Germans also perpetrated a number of provocations, attacking towns located in the Polish zone, and the Poles did not accept this without any reaction. During the following months, the Germans prepared a strategic plan for an attack on the Poznań region. The French members of the Inter-Allied Commission reacted to this situation. After months of negotiations and problems with transport, an agreement was reached on the transportation of the Polish Army, commanded by General J. Haller, from France to Poland. This happened in April 1919, and the arrival of almost as many as 70000 well armed and equipped soldiers was to play an extremely important role in the fight for the borders of the reborn Poland.

Also the continually developing Greater Poland Army got involved in the fight for the borders of the Republic of Poland. At the request of the

government in Warsaw, General Dowbor-Muśnicki agreed to send troops to the besieged Lviv. In the face of increasing tensions between Poland and Germany in Greater Poland, in May 1919, the Greater Poland Army was placed under the command of Józef Piłsudski, who ordered a strategic war alert. In June, front-line clashes again intensified, and on 2 June, the Commissariat announced a state of emergency. The positive culmination of the hardships of the entire Greater Poland society and the political leaders in Poznań, Warsaw and France was the signing of the peace treaty by the Germans on 28 June 1919.

In political terms, the Greater Poland Uprising must be evaluated positively. Sceptics would surely point to the fact that the majority of the indisputably Polish territories of Greater Poland would have been granted back to Poland one way or another and the casualties and destruction could have been avoided. However, it was still an act of the will of the Greater Poland general society to start fighting with the hated German invader. At the same time, this was in keeping with the then popular slogan of the self-determination of nations. The Greater Poland Uprising made the western superpowers clearly aware of the gravity and drama of the situation in the Poznań region, and at the same time, it made them sensitive to the Polish expectations regarding other territories in the Prussian partition. However, the Uprising could not have succeeded, if it were not for certain circumstances, such as the weakening of Germany by the lost Great War, the abdication of

Emperor William II, and finally the outbreak of the communist revolution of the Spartacus Group. Furthermore, the fate of Greater Poland and other territories depended, to a great extent, on the decision of two powerful allies - France and England, which were in competition with each other. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that the success of the Polish cause became a defining argument in the European policy of the above-mentioned superpowers.

From the point of view of the relations between Poznań and Warsaw, the Uprising clearly demonstrated the strength of the Greater Poland general society to the government in Warsaw. Despite misunderstandings which occurred at that time, as well as different opinions on the policy of the Polish government towards the Greater Poland inhabitants, it is worth noticing that the attitude of the Temporary Chief of State towards this region was not negative. Marek Rezler Ph.D. rightly noticed that, despite his declarations on not engaging in the regaining of the territories of the Prussian partition (during a conversation with Count Harry Kessler in the Magdeburg fortress) Józef Piłsudski, on several occasions in the following weeks and months, during official political talks with Germans, stood up for the Poznań region, going even as far as to terminate political relations with Berlin (15 December 1918). Nevertheless, neither did Piłsudski manage to earn the confidence of National Democracy activists nor the Greater Poland general society, in which the stereotype of the lack of help from Warsaw and the Chief of State was effectively instigated by local political

activists.

Despite this, it is worth emphasising that during the formation of the Greater Poland Army, its integration with the Polish Army, the fighting on various fronts for the borders and in official contacts with Warsaw, Greater Poland appeared not just as a paragon of lawfulness and reliability but also of an independent outlook on the political form of the reborn Poland.

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