

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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DOWBOR

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MUŚNICKI I Józef

Person

DOWBOR-MUŚNICKI Józef

Born

1867

Died

1937

Description

General of the branch and commander-in-chief of the Greater Poland Uprising in the years 1918-1919. Born on 25 October 1867 in Garbów (the then Sandomierz powiat), to the family of Roman and Antonina née Wierzbicka. The family were from the old Lithuanian clan of Dowbor (Daubor) which had the "Friend" coat of arms (two hearts pierced with one arrow), the clan had settled from the 15th century in Kemaves and Musninkai (hence the second part of the

surname), and from the 17th century in the surroundings of Staszów (in the Sandomierz region). He spent his childhood and early youth in the atmosphere of an old Polish manor, fostering his ancestral traditions. Until the age of 10, he studied at home under the supervision of a governess. He then attended a Russian gymnasium in Radom. Having graduated through 4 years, he joined the Nicholas I Cadet Corps in Saint Petersburg, which he completed in 1886, being awarded the rank of a non-commissioned officer. He continued his education in the Constantine Military School in Saint-Petersburg. After his graduation from the military academy in 1888, he was awarded the rank of second lieutenant and assignment to the 140th Infantry Regiment in Kostroma (on the Volga River). On 7 August 1891, he was promoted to lieutenant. After six-year service in Siberia, he was assigned to the 1st Grenadier Regiment in Jarosław, where he completed his service for the following 3 years. His exceptional abilities and his willingness to comprehensively learn dedicated military expertise made him a natural to enter the General Staff Academy in Saint Petersburg. In the face of the difficulties which Polish Catholics had to overcome, he changed his denomination (to Calvin) and after passing the exams he was admitted to the Academy on 9 October 1899. On 12 November 1901, he was promoted to the rank of second-captain and on 6 May 1901 - captain. Upon graduation from the Academy on 28 May 1902, he received a number of awards. The practical training for front-line troops, necessary to be counted among officers of the General Staff, was held by him in the headquarters of the Moscow Military District and in the 17th Corps and then in the 11th Grenadier Regiment (1902/1903-1904). During the Russian-Japanese campaign from the year 1904 he was an orderly officer with the 1st Siberian Corps. After the

signing of the peace treaty with Japan in 1905, he was sent to Harbin, with an appointment for the post of chief of staff of the Cross-Border Army Corps (Transamur Military District), with the task of ensuring the defence of the railway route in Manchuria. On 23 July 1906, he was transferred to the newly organised Irkutsk Military District, and on 2 March 1908, to the staff of the 10th Corps in Kharkiv as a special orderly officer, and on 6 December he was promoted again. On 9 November 1910 he was promoted to chief of staff of the 11th Infantry Division, deployed in Lutsk, Dubno and Kremenets. On 30 April 1912, at his own request, he was transferred to the same post to the 7th Infantry division in Voronezh, with whom he was sent to the front after the war broke out. Having great military expertise and experience at his disposal, taken from the Japanese campaign and demonstrating bold initiative and personal courage, he contributed to a number of successes on the front, including the smashing of the Austrian cavalry corps commanded by General Wittmann on 27 July 1914 near the village of Telatyn, and the Austrian 15th Infantry Division in the area of the village of Hopki on the following day. For an attack conducted on the positions of the Austrian 2nd Corps near Majdanek Górny (north of Tomaszów), he received the highest award for valour - the Golden Order of St. George. He also succeeded during battles against German troops near Łódź, contributing to the defeat of the Infantry Brigade commanded by General Paczeński near the Widawa River and the infantry division near Bełchatów. After the massacre of the Russian armies near Łódź, on 29 November 1914, he was appointed commander of the 14th Siberian Rifle Regiment, which was under his command until 11 November 1915. In the battle of Przasnysz (north of Warsaw), while crossing the Orzyć River near the village of Podosie, he was wounded and

treated in hospital in Moscow. After his return to the regiment, he still fought on the German Front. After the defeat of the Russian armies in Galicia, the 14th Siberia Rifle Regiment was transferred to Chełmno, retreating to Brest through the Kłodawa River while still fighting. From the Brest Fortress, the regiment was sent to the Daugava River, where Dowbor-Muśnicki was badly wounded. On 15 August 1915 he rose to the rank of second lieutenant general (presently the equivalent of brigadier general), and one month later, he received assignment to the staff of the I Army as special orderly general. In February 1916, leading the 123rd Infantry Division, he went to Asia Minor and in November, he was sent again to the German Front. As the commander of the 38th Infantry Regiment he fought near Riga, supporting the 14th Siberian Infantry Regiment. In January 1917, he was appointed chief of staff of the 1st Army and on 5 May, as he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general (presently the equivalent of division general), he was assigned to the command of the 38th Corps with which he breached the German positions near Krev. After the February revolution in 1917, among the Poles remaining in Russia, the idea of the establishment of their own military forces was revived. Measures to make this idea happen were taken by circles associated with National Democracy. The fall of the tsarist system and the well-disposed attitude of the Temporary Government enabled the implementation of this idea, therefore the Supreme Polish Military Committee (Polish: Naczpól) was established at the congress of Military Poles (June 1917) and also a resolution was adopted to form, for a start, a single Polish corps. Naczpól proposed that the command of the Polish Corps be handed over to Dowbor-Muśnicki (13 July 1917). He took this post on 6 August 1917 and vigorously started to form a three-division corps in Belarus, based on an incomplete

Polish Rifle Division and the revolutionised reserve regiment of the division in Belgorod. However, the 1st Polish Corps developed slowly and during its peak period it counted about 30 000 soldiers (it comprised three infantry divisions, three regiments of uhlans, three artillery brigades, one heavy artillery division, one mortar battalion, one engineer regiment, rear units and one aviation troop). After the outbreak of the October revolution, Dowbor-Muśnicki came into conflict with the Soviet authorities and received an order to demobilise the corps, which he refused to obey. A series of clashes with revolutionary troops followed (the seizure of the fortress in Bobruysk, skirmishes at the railway station in Yaseni, near Asipovichy and Zhlobin, Kalenkavichy and in the region of Rahachow and Polobov). In the face of the fiasco of the peace negotiations in Brest, the German armies resumed their offensive and on 18 February, made their way into the territory of Belarus. The situation of the 1st Polish Corps became exceptionally difficult as the German army with which the corps was supposed to fight approached from the west, and the revolutionary armies with which the corps was already involved in a military conflict, marched from the east. In such a position, Dowbor-Muśnicki contacted the Regency Council in Warsaw and submitted to it. As the occupation of the Minsk district was very likely, contacts with the German high command were established and an agreement was signed as a consequence of which, the boundaries of the Polish occupation, which covered the area to the west of the Dniester River, including the Bobruysk fortress, were designated. The 1st Polish Corps was considered a neutral unit, subordinated to the Regency Council. The agreement also regulated issues related to possible cooperation between the Polish and German troops. At the same time, the decision

was taken in Warsaw that the Regency Council would take political power over the Corps, which resulted in the protests of certain politicians and the objection of the German high command. Then, Dowbor-Muśnicki made the decision to capitulate and return the soldiers to their country. After failed plots in the ranks of the Corps and an attempt at a coup d'état on the part of Piłsudski's adherents in June-July 1918, the Corps was transported back to its country almost in its entirety (about 23 500 people) and deployed. Even before the evacuation, Dowbor-Muśnicki had ordered the soldiers to organise themselves under the command of officers and await further orders. In the face of the cool reception received from Piłsudski, and the inability of both individuals to come to terms, a conflict started to escalate. In the meantime, on 27 December 1918, an uprising broke out in Poznań, and the command of it was taken by Captain S. Taczak, laying the foundations for the future Greater Poland Army and Central Command. Treating the appointment of S. Taczak as temporary, J. Piłsudski suggested to the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council in Poznań that Dowbor-Muśnicki or General E. Henning-Michaelis be appointed commander-in-chief. On 6 January 1919, Dowbor Muśnicki received a written call from Poznań to take command. He arrived on 8 January, concluded a written agreement on 11 January to take over the military command (the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council reserved the right to approve the formula of the oath, appoint officers and military officials and designate a department head responsible for military issues and public security). Formally, he took over the post of commander-in-chief on 16 January. His intention was to form an army counting 50 000-60 000 people, based on insurgent units and conscription to the army. For this purpose he contributed to the issuance of

decrees by the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council regarding the call to arms for 11 age groups subject to conscription (1891-1901) as well as officers and physicians until the year 1879. However, this was related to major difficulties, there were even open protests against such a decision. Troops accustomed to certain democratic freedoms could not initially come to terms with the strict military discipline. An obstacle in the formation of the regular army was the shortage of officers, especially senior officers. Dowbor-Muśnicki was able to increase their number by promoting deputy officers from the former German army and also the most capable non-commissioned officers. Senior officers were brought in from Warsaw? they were assigned from the former 1st Polish Corps (181 people) and former Austrian army or former legionnaires. He also tried to attract local officers and as a result of his efforts, the great majority of the officers (mainly the younger ones) came from the Greater Poland region? as early as August 1919, 939 officers out of 1150 officers of all ranks came from the Poznań powiat. He divided the Greater Poland Front quickly into four sections: the northern, western, south-western and southern. Tactically, the commanders of the respective sections were subordinated to Central Command, and administratively, they were subordinated to the commanders of Military Districts in the area of their operations. The existing volunteer units were transformed gradually into regular companies and battalions, creating the foundations for future regiments. Then, he proceeded with the formation of divisions. This way, in front-line conditions, a regular army was organised by the time of the conclusion of the truce. After the conclusion of the armistice in Trier (16 II), he reorganised the front dividing it into three sections: the northern, western and southern, with three Military Districts assigned to

them, whereby the commanders of the respective fronts were at the same time the commanders of the districts. In order to introduce improvements in the functioning of the respective armies, three rear area commands in Poznań, Gniezno and Jarocin were established. In order to ensure the further inflow of professional officers and non-commissioned officers, a number of various military schools were established. The effect of the work of Dowbor-Muśnicki and his staff was impressive. In the first weeks of June 1919, the Greater Poland Army consisted of three infantry divisions, the Toruń and Bytom infantry regiments, three cavalry regiments, three heavy artillery divisions, one mounted artillery battalion, one air formation, two battalions of sappers, two signal battalions, one railway battalion, military police units, garrison troops, etc. The sanitary-medical service was made available. It consisted of sanitary troops, but also 6 field hospitals, a sanitary depot and a drug and dressing company. At that time, the army consisted of 10 000 officers and 92 000 non-commissioned officers and riflemen in total. Furthermore, it comprised the People's Guard formations (the subsequent National Defence formations), counting over 100 000 soldiers. As the commander-in-chief of the Greater Poland Army, Dowbor-Muśnicki demonstrated exceptional organisational skills and contrary to the initial predictions of Piłsudski, he gained deep appreciation and respect. As he had substantial military expertise and great experience, he was perfectly aware of the different social and political conditions in the area of the former Prussian partition and was able to take advantage of them skilfully. Though he was respected as an outstanding commander, he was not loved by everyone for taking the necessary but not always popular decisions. At the same time, he was a supporter of the idea of the expansion of the uprising to the Pomerania region

and of taking control of Gdańsk. He contributed greatly to the formation of the Pomeranian (4th Pomerania Rifle Division) and Upper Silesian units (Bytom Rifle Regiment). In recognition of his merits, on 19 March 1919, he was promoted to the rank of general of the branch. 3 May was a great day for him - a ceremonial parade of the Greater Poland Armies, with the participation of politicians from the Supreme People's Council, allied military missions and numerous journalists took place at Ławica Airport in Poznań. In view of the approaching day of the signing of the peace treaty, German militarist circles proceeded with offensive preparations in order to regain the former Poznań province at any cost. The emerging risk required immediate agreement with the Warsaw government, at least in the field of military operations. On 7 May, W. Korfanty put forward a motion in Parliament for "the unity of the national army", giving rise to the integration of the Greater Poland Armies with the Polish Army. Other steps to unify the military forces included the proposal of the Supreme People's Council to subordinate the Greater Poland Armies operationally to the Chief Command of the Polish Army. Neither was this an easy step for the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council nor for Dowbor-Muśnicki; it meant the abandonment of many ambitions and plans. On 27 May, he met Piłsudski in order to discuss the principles of cooperation related to the defence of the country against the German threat. This was the last address of Dowbor-Muśnicki as an independent commander of the Greater Poland Armies. On 1 August, the Polish Parliament issued an act on the temporary organisation of the former Prussian Partition, according to which the Supreme People's Council (by decree of 15 August), subordinated the Greater Poland formations to the Chief Command of the Polish Army. By the end of 1919, over 1600 officers as

well as 92 000 non-commissioned officers and riflemen from Greater Poland had been placed under the orders of the Chief Command, this was almost one quarter of the Polish Army which consisted of about half a million soldiers at that time. On 1 June 1919, Dowbor-Muśnicki was nominated the commander of the Greater Poland Front (order dated 20 August 1919), however, his position was already becoming weaker, as the Greater Poland armies were systematically being redirected to the Eastern Front - a situation which he opposed. Ultimately, the Greater Poland Front was liquidated in March 1920, and general Dowbor-Muśnicki was practically a general without a commission. In view of the defeats of the Polish armies in the east, he applied for commission in the newly formed Volunteer Army, but to no effect. He did not accept the posts of minister of military affairs nor commander of the Northern Front, which were offered to him. When the threat of the Bolshevik offensive in July 1920 appeared, he stayed at his estate in Lusowo (which he later renamed Batorowo) near Poznań. He spent the last seventeen years of his life working on a farm, putting the files of the 1st Polish Corps and Greater Poland Armies to order and writing memoirs which he finished in 1932. He participated twice in elections to regional assemblies and several times to municipal assemblies. He was also the patron of the association of former members of General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki's 1st Polish Corps in Russia. During Piłsudski's Coup d'État in May 1926 he arrived in Poznań, where he received a proposal to stand for the government with Gen. Haller, who was in charge of the Volunteer Army. However, it all ended up as unfulfilled intentions. Dowbor-Muśnicki died on 26 October 1937 on his estate in Batorowo after a long illness. He was buried in the parish cemetery in Lusowo. He was awarded the following orders and medals: the

Russian Order of St. George (4th class), the St. George Golden Weapon ("Golden Sword"), the Order of Saint Stanislaw (3rd class), the Order of Saint Vladimir (3rd and 4th grade), the Order of Saint Anna (4th class)? the Chinese Imperial Order of the Double Dragon (3 grades, 3rd class)? Italian Cross of the Order of the Crown of Italy (3rd class)? British Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of Bath and the Latvian War Cross (2nd class). He did not receive any Polish decorations. It was not until the 80th anniversary of the Greater Poland uprising that he was posthumously awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta in 1998. Also, on 27 December 2018 - on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the victorious uprising - he was posthumously awarded the Order of the White Eagle by Andrzej Duda - the President of the Republic of Poland. The order was handed over to Tomasz Łęcki - the Director of the Greater Poland Museum of Independence. He had four children born of his marriage to Agnieszka née Korsońska: Gedymin (1906), Janina (1908-1940), Olgierd (1914-1938) and Agnieszka (1919-1940). He left many professional works related to military issues (in Russian) and in the form of a book? *Krótki szkic do historii I Korpusu Polskiego*, cz. I-III, Warszawa 1919? *Na marginesie książki o pułkowniku Lisie-Kuli Fr. Demela i W. Lipińskiego*, Batorowo 1933 (monograph)? *Moje wspomnienia*. Warszawa 1935. He published a series of articles in "Rzeczpospolita" entitled *Myśli Wojskowe* (1920), and then also smaller articles in "Placówka" and other magazines.

Bibliography

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Author of the entry

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