What events led to the outbreak of the Greater Poland Uprising in December 1918?

Marek Rezler

Select Pages

The Greater Poland Uprising has been analysed mostly in terms of its battles, which are dynamic, the most attractive and easy to remember.

However, all events and phenomena throughout history are merely links in a never-ending chain of events, each of which has its cause and each of which is a starting point for further facts. Before the outbreak of the uprising in Poznań, certain specific circumstances had appeared which urged the people to start the fight. It is therefore necessary to describe the historical background.

We have got used to treating Polish uprisings with great esteem, which is a good thing. However, there have barely been any considerate and objective discussions focusing on the fact that most of our uprisings ended in defeat, which then gave rise to feelings of helplessness, tragedy or even frustration in hindsight. Internal mistakes, an incorrect way of thinking or wrongly chosen methods of fighting for independence have very rarely been regarded as the causes of defeats. Our history has witnessed spontaneous uprisings occurring at the wrong moment in time, poorly prepared and with emotions prevailing over reason and good organisation. However, the uprising in Greater Poland in 1918-1919 was organised in a very reasonable manner.

Before the Great War

For over a hundred years before the uprising in Greater Poland, local citizens had been participating in armed conflicts and carving their own specific path to independence. The traditions of the region go back to the Bar Confederation (1768-1772), which in certain circles is perceived as a time of armed uprisings against Russia, and partly against Prussia. The inhabitants of Greater Poland had their part in Kościuszko’s Insurrection

of 1794, which, although successful in the region, did not end victoriously due to the defeat near Maciejowice. In the years 1806-1807, a victorious uprising against the Prussians broke out. It was initiated by Napoleon, who wanted to take advantage of the Greater Poland residents in order to hasten the final fall of the Prussians, who had lost the battle of Jena–Auerstedt. At that time, General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski and Józef Wybicki arrived in Poznań to urge local people to act. Within two weeks, Greater Poland was liberated from the invader armies, which is described in Book 10 of Adam Mickiewicz's "Pan Tadeusz", in the story told by Bartek Prusak, a Pole who came from Prussia and who observed the events that happened there.

There is an uprising against the Austrians in 1809 that is less well-known. It must also be noted that the participation of volunteers from the region in the November Uprising is of exceptional significance, considering Greater Poland's tradition of fighting for independence. The defeat was a starting point for reflections on whether the adopted fighting method was correct. After the fall of Napoleon and the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Poznań, there were different opinions on the obligation to remain in a defensive position and choose another method of action, given the inability to choose a suitable date for initiating the fight for independence. This is when the activity of Dezydery Chłapowski, the pioneer of modern agriculture in Greater Poland, started. The first months of 1831, however, set a new direction for action, namely organic work combined with a readiness to assume the armed

struggle. The struggle would come for sure, that much was inevitable, but no one knew if the right circumstances would appear in ten, fifty or a hundred years. During that time, the invader would germanise the country, erase national awareness, strive to integrate Polish society with the Prussian (German since 1871) state and deprive the Polish nation of its identity. Thus, the local people had to focus on the comprehensive education of Polish society, which would put the Poles on the right track, and not on futile uprisings that, without the help from outside, would certainly end in tragedy and jeopardise the effects of the pro-independence activity pursued thus far. The specific nature of Greater Poland's road to independence was also about taking advantage of the invader's methods of action and potential and therefore creating competitive structures, which will be described in detail below. Considering the method described, the Revolutions of 1848 that took place in Greater Poland were merely an "accident at work" - they were laudable, but did not necessarily match the spontaneous objective, similarly to the participation of volunteers from Greater Poland in the January Uprising in 1863-1864.

The years 1864-1914, between the fall of the January Uprising and the outbreak of World War I, were of immense significance in terms of the shaping of new political forces in Europe, and the raising of the awareness of the Poles in the province of Poznań. A new generation was raised, which was not only affected by the awareness of yet another defeat, but also brought up in the spirit of organic work and hardened in the fire of

emergency laws. All of the above was happening in the atmosphere of the approaching conflict between the greatest European superpowers.

The intensity of the organised Germanisation activities (not only in Poland, but also in Alsace, Lorraine and Schleswig-Holstein) grew visibly from January 1871, since the establishment of the German Empire. There was not enough time for them to unite Polish society in the German spirit. An inevitable, great conflict in the centre of Europe was approaching, so the Germans felt the urge to ensure that this part of the continent was at least relatively peaceful, if not loyal. A method based on force was therefore implemented. Luckily for the Poles, the implementation was rather awkward. The 1880s and the beginning of the next century was a time of particularly intense denationalisation of the Poles in the Poznań region and in the Russian Partition. After 1871, a number of extraordinary emergency laws were adopted by the Reich. In 1872-1874, the Polish language was almost entirely removed from schools. The German authorities also tried to limit the number of teachers of Polish nationality. In 1876, German was made the official language of the courts and offices. In 1885, the subjects of other countries were ordered to immediately leave the Reich. Another decisive move of the Berlin government was the establishment of the Settlement Commission in 1886, whose main task was to supervise those matters related to land ownership and, if possible, to hand it over to the Germans. The organisation was initially very successful, taking advantage of the fiscal, and not patriotic, attitude of some of the landed gentry

from Greater Poland. It was only the fervent counteraction of Priest Piotr Wawrzyniak that stopped this tendency.

An event that caused great controversy was the establishment of the German Eastern Marches Society (Deutscher Ostmarkenverein), called H-K-T from the first letters of its founders' names. The organisation, which comprised of no more than 21000 members in 1901, was very active and radical in Germanisation activities along the eastern borders of the Reich. Events that were particularly shocking for the public took place in the beginning of the 20th century: the obligation to use the German language in religion classes was introduced. The right to use Polish had already previously been limited. German was the only language allowed at public meetings or in school classes. However, students and their parents living in the Prussian Partition strongly objected to the introduction of German in religion classes, which were the last bastion of Polish culture left in schools. That period witnessed the rebirth of tendencies visible in the Kulturkampf era, when Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, contrary to his intentions, instead of polarising Polish community, led to the unification of Polish environments around the Catholic faith and clergy.

The next stage of exercising pressure on Polish circles started in 1904, when it was decided that an administrative body's opinion was a necessary condition to obtain consent to build new residential premises. The most spectacular proof that this approach was a bad one, was, among others, the demonstration of Michał Drzymała.

The fact that the German administration lacked any sense of humour inspired it to use force, by hook or by crook. There were scandalous, and even grotesque scenes, which were later eagerly cited by Polish national associations, which clearly treated Drzymała instrumentally. Furthermore, in 1908, the so-called “muzzle act” was passed. It banned the use of Polish at meetings held in towns inhabited by less than 60% Poles.

The Polish environments demonstrated various forms of resistance to Germanisation, which, however, always remained within the limits of the applicable laws. At the highest level, in the Prussian and German parliament, there was the Polish Circle, which adapted its methods to the tendencies present in Berlin’s current policy. There were also skilled Polish parliamentarians with an excellent knowledge of political reality, who took a strong and firm position in favour of Poland during World War I and when Poland was regaining its independence.

However, it was the Organicists who had to carry the heaviest burden of the fight against Germanisation

Conspirators and politicians

In the period preceding the outbreak of the First World War, the fourth generation of Organicists was active in the territory of the Prussian Partition. A look back on the scope of their work allows for the conclusion that within less than 100 years they managed to establish structures which were completely independent of the Berlin

authorities, covering nearly all of the crucial domains of state and economic life.

The Germans probably only realised the growing threat when they discovered the phenomenon of the successful companies founded and managed by Priest Piotr Wawrzyniak. Although the Organicists managed to establish a flexible economic and organisational system that could compete with the invader's authorities, they were unable to stop the mental changes that were inevitable due to being a part of a foreign country for such a long time. If an uprising was to break out, the opportunity had to appear as soon as possible.

In 1918, when the power of the Reich was waning, the inhabitants of Greater Poland already had strong foundations to ensure a swift takeover of power in the region, and to take control of the basic branches of economy - apart from industry, as the Poznań province was a region that was meant to serve as an agricultural base. At that time, the Prussian Partition could either passively wait for decisions to be taken at the peace conference and accept them "as they were", or start an armed uprising, a demonstration that would move these decisions in the direction more desired by the Polish people.

In Greater Poland, the organisation that had the biggest influence was the National-Democratic Party (Stronnictwo Narodowo-Demokratyczne), established in 1897. It was a national and anti-German movement presenting a specific and clear vision of a future independent Poland. The NDP had practically no rivals, not even socialists or the

peasants' movement, while many leading Polish institutions, such as the Union of Earning and Economic Associations, a large number of People's Banks, the People's Libraries Society or numerous corporate organisations, were in the hands of priest-community activists who were in close cooperation with the NDP. There were also professional organisations and the Catholic Society of Polish Workers' circles, which later became the basis for creating the Greater Polish Christian Democrats Party, which in turn took the lead in the Polish circles in Upper Silesia. To a certain degree, this ideological monolith was very useful (particularly during the fight for freedom). However, it could be considered as an obstacle as far as the region's functioning in an independent, multi-party state was concerned.

In this reality, the extensive social, ideological and economic movement, based on anti-German and pro-independence environments, fuelled conspiracy activities, especially among the youths from secondary schools. In Slavic countries, the organisation that gained greatest popularity was the Gymnastic Society "Sokół" ("Falcon") established in 1862 in the Czech Republic. The first nest of "Sokół" in the Prussian Partition was formed in December 1884 in Inowrocław, on the initiative of scouts from Lviv. Soon, the network of "Sokół's" nests covered the entire territory of Greater Poland, relying mostly on petite bourgeoisie connected to the peasant movement.

From the very beginning, "Sokół" in Greater Poland was only theoretically a society focusing on the popularisation of physical culture. In fact it was an association preparing young people for

military service and shaping their patriotic attitude and attachment to national tradition. The scope of its activity covered not only the Prussian Partition, but also Polish communities in exile, among others, in Westphalia and Rhineland. Before the outbreak of the Great War, thirteen districts, which since July 1893 were associated in the Greater Poland Falcons Association and, two years later, in the Polish Falcons Association in Germany, were active. Before the war, there were 291 nests (or circles) comprising nearly 12 thousand members.

The idea emerged over time to include teenagers in pro-independence activities as part of scouting, which at the time was very popular and, more importantly, fully legal. The most popular organisation operating in this area was the Tomasz Zan Society, the core activity of which was focused on self-education. In fact, it prepared its participants for pro-independence activities. “Zet”, i.e. the Polish Youth Association (founded in Krakow by Zygmunt Balicki and operating in all of the partitions), was better organised and more targeted. Its participants included Polish students from Berlin, Leipzig and Munich. It was focused on training future managers and leaders. However, the idea of moving scouting to the territory of the Prussian Partition was initiated by members of “Sokół”. In 1912, on the initiative of Doctor Ksawery Zakrzewski, the Vice-President of the Poznań branch of “Sokół”, the first scout groups were created in Greater Poland too. The first Polish scout patrol in Greater Poland, named “Poznań”, started activity on 17 October 1912. By the end of the year, an entire scout group was

formed. Later on, four scout groups were joined in the scout troop “Piast”. The patrons of the groups were, subsequently: Bolesław Chrobry (Bolesław the Brave), Kazimierz Wielki (Casimir the Great), Mieczysław I and Władysław Jagiełło. Not long afterwards, legal Polish scout groups were established all around Greater Poland. Its most prominent leaders were: Cezary Jindra, Wincenty Wierzejewski, Henryk Śniegocki and Antoni Wysocki. Girl scouts, organised in their own (less numerous) groups, were trained as nurses. As time passed, a rule was developed that a teenager would pass from scouts to “Sokół”, and from “Sokół” to the army.

In 1914, there were approximately 40 scout groups operating in the territory of the Prussian Partition. They included nearly 900 male and female scouts in total. Two years previously, secret Polish Rifle Squads had also been established. Their members, just as their colleagues from Galicia, carried out secret army training.

Furthermore, in 1864-1914, so in the period between the fall of the January Uprising and the outbreak of the Great War, a new generation of young Poles unburdened with the experience of defeat, raised in a patriotic spirit, hardened in the fire of the reality of Kulturkampf, emergency laws and the removal of the Polish language from education and administration, and school strikes, was born and brought up. It was therefore natural that activists started to form secret, formally self-educational organisations which, in fact, focused on pro-independence activity.

It was all about conspiracy. It must not be forgotten, however, that all of the Polish organisations operating in the Prussian Partition did great educational work. It resulted, among other things, from the specific character of the family and social life of the era when every community, focused around handicraft, religion or sports, took care of the education of their community members, fostered national awareness, organised trips, concerts, amateur theatre performances, feasts, picnics and festive integration meetings and, as far as was possible, also acted as publishers.

In the flames of war

Nearly two million soldiers of Polish nationality served in the armies of the invader countries. 500000 of them passed through the German army, fighting mainly on the toughest, Western Front. It is assumed that at least 148000 of them were killed. Before the rebirth of Poland, the Poles had to fight against each other in opposing armies. It was also they who contributed to the change of the moods within the army, when after several months, victorious marches and battles gave way to a positional war that was long-lasting, near pointless and disastrous to all of the sides of the conflict. The soldiers on the front were occupied with their own affairs, making them unable to influence the situation in their country. However, the Polish youth and the members of the secret organisations who did not go to war did not suspend their activity. From 1915, the Secret Independence Organisation functioned in schools. A year before, “battle groups of ten” had been organised among the

scouts, and in May 1915, the “Union” Sports Club", the core activity of which was focused on recreation and independence, was founded. The leading activists and organisers of these associations included Stanisław Nogaj and Zenon Kosidowski. Similar organisations were established in other towns of Greater Poland. On 2 April 1916, the Municipal Scout Quarters, led by Henryk Śniegocki, was founded.

As a natural consequence, it gave hope to the Polish soldiers who started to realise that there was a possibility for Poland to be reborn. The soldiers did not put too much effort in the service and the Polish language was commonly used in conversations among Polish soldiers, who were yearning for the bloody war to finally end. A support system for deserters and soldiers who feigned illness was organised. They were provided with fake documents, and those who were under the biggest threat were sent to the Kingdom of Poland, where they became runners, exchanging messages with other conspirators. Despite the ban, deserters escaped with weapons, which were extremely valuable. Conspirators from scouts’ circles soon started to gather weapons in secret warehouses.

At the time, the scouts were the most active organisers of conspiratorial and national work. During the war, from the end of 1916 in particular, they became famous for their propaganda campaigns and patriotic demonstrations; the most spectacular one, commemorating the 100th anniversary of Tadeusz Kościuszko’s death, was held in October 1917, under the statue of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań.

At that time, the youth from secondary schools was also establishing its own secret organisations. In 1915, the Polish Youth Association “Kościuszko”, based on the structure of “Zet”, was founded at the Auguste Victoria Gymnasium (in 1919 renamed the Karol Marcinkowski Gymnasium School). Its scope soon covered other secondary schools in the city. Meanwhile, the secret Youth’s Folk Education Society, “Sowa”, which included the so-called “ambulance”, that prepared its members for courier service, property protection and sanitary protection, was linked to the Tomasz Zan Society

Before the Uprising

The autumn of 1917 was crucial for the organisation of Polish conspiratorial activities in the region of Poznań. Work started on creating an association, the core focus of which would be to prepare an armed uprising. After consultations held with the activists of the Polish Military Organisation in Warsaw, the decision was made to establish a similar association in Poznań. As a result, on 15 February 1918, the first group of members of the secret Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition (PMOPP) was sworn in. It was a cadre organisation, which in 1918 was composed of no more than 70 members. In the late autumn of 1918, there were eleven secret storage houses for weapons, ammunition and military equipment in the capital of the region. On 20 October, the internal decision was made to focus directly on military training.

Finally, the time came for the determination of

the details regarding the structures of the conspiratorial Polish administration in the Prussian Partition. Every community, even the smallest, has its elites. In Greater Poland, at the end of the 19th century, the elites included people representing administration, the landed gentry, the clergy and medicine and education - educated people recognised within the community, with whom the better situated representatives of handicraft and commerce were willing to cooperate. In a large city, the group also included industrialists (if they were available), university professors and people representing the world of the arts, culture and law. The elite had an immense impact on the environment it lived and worked in. Its most eminent representatives, if they wanted to pursue higher, also patriotic goals, easily became political and national leaders in a specific city, this was true of both Polish and German leaders. Priests, doctors, pharmacists, landowners, office clerks – people representing these professions usually enjoyed great esteem, and their opinion was of importance in the community. The representatives of the local elites held meetings, had the possibility to contact the “wider world”, and frequently pursued goals considerably exceeding affairs related to their family, their closest environment or their town. If, to all this, we add the patriotic traditions cultivated in families and the vision of a free Poland, it becomes clear why the political leaders of the Polish pro-independence movement originated from these circles. This is where local, field “shadow cabinets” started to form in 1918. During unofficial meetings, in secret discussions,

the process of distributing tasks and functions in a specific area, in the case of a breakdown of the German administration or power, started.

The strategy of the German authorities towards the Polish communities resembled the way subordinate native peoples were treated by colonists. It was assumed that when the offices were fully germanised, Polish was removed from school and the Poles were banned from occupying key positions in local bodies, the Germans would retain their power for longer. It was expected that the Poles, deprived of leaders and administrative guides and suddenly left alone, would become powerless – that the very awareness of their situation should take the drive for any changes away from them. However, the Polish side was able to introduce its representatives to leading positions in administration and regional bodies. These representatives had received education from… the Germans, for example in the Berlin parliament. It was similar in the army, where the Germans thought that preventing Poles from being promoted to higher ranks or positions would make it impossible for them to organise and carry out an armed uprising. They did not expect that non-commissioned officers and officers, up to the rank of a captain, would be able to organise effective military action. These assumptions, concerning both the civil authorities and the army, proved that the Germans heavily underestimated the organisational capabilities and flexibility of the Polish leadership groups in Greater Poland.

In the summer of 1918, the Inter-Party Citizens' Committee, which had so far been functioning

underground, was transformed into the Central Citizens' Committee (CCC) with its counterparts in poviats and larger towns. The seven-member executive division of the Committee was led by Priest Stanisław Adamski. The journalist Adam Poszwiński became the organisation's Secretary. In October, a group of Polish parliamentarians with Władysław Seyda, Wojciech Korfanty and Priest Antoni Stychel postulated at the Reich parliament that the territories of the Prussian Partition should be annexed to the reborn Poland.

In mid-October 1918, during a session attended by representatives of the Citizens' Committees of the largest towns in the region, a temporary Polish Civil Guard Headquarters was established, with Julian Lange as its leader. Units of the formation started secret military training. On 11 November 1918, an official decision on the forming of units of the Civil Guard (Bürgerwehr), based on parity, was made. The Guard's task was to maintain order within its territory. The Poles used this opportunity to establish another military formation. On 27 November, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council took the lead and changed the name of the Civil Guard in Greater Poland to the People's Guard, which marginalised a share of the communities of German and Jewish origin.

The outbreak of the revolution in Germany on 28 October 1918 meant that events developed faster. On 11 November, an armistice was signed in Compiègne, which marked the end of the fighting on the Western Front.

From 11 November 1918, a network of worker

and soldier councils (WSC), of revolutionary and nationalist nature, was formed in Poznań and in other towns. On the same day, the Central Citizens' Committee revealed itself and took a new name: the Temporary Supreme People's Council, with Doctor Czesław Meissner as its leader. Two days after its establishment, the executive division of the organisation, i.e. the Commissariat of the SPC, was formed. It had three members: Priest Stanisław Adamski, Wojciech Korfanty and Adam Poszwiński.

The operational scheme of the temporary Supreme People's Council was drawn up by Priest Stanisław Adamski, an activist who applied a commercial company management system to the rules of the central Polish authority in the Partition territory.

The next stage of this activity was a session of the Partition Sejm of Poznań on 3-5 December 1918. This session was attended by delegates from Pomerania, Greater Poland and Upper Silesia. This session of the Parliament, held in a solemn and patriotic atmosphere and treated as a feast of the Polish community in the Partition territory, went smoothly. First and foremost, the Supreme People's Council, composed of 80 members, was formed, with Doctor Bolesław Krysiewicz as its leader. The composition of the Commissariat was extended to 6 people; each of the commissionaires, regardless of their scope of obligations, represented individual partition districts. Two sub-commissariats of the SPC, in Gdańsk and in Bytom, were also established. Poznań became a political centre representing all of the territories of the Prussian Partition.

Political power is useless without an army, the decision was therefore taken to form units of the People’s Guard in individual towns. Before the People’s Guard, there were the Guard and Security Service units, which, over time, became a form of support for the future uprising.

After the outbreak of revolution in Germany, the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition recovered. On 11 November 1918, a team of leaders, or the so-called Council of Eleven, with Mieczysław Andrzejewski as its leader, was formed. Two days later, this team organised a spectacular entry into the meeting of the Poznań WSC at the City Hall, forcing it to accept several Polish members; the action was later referred to as the “attack on City Hall”. From that moment on, the Poznań branch of the Council was entirely in Polish hands. The Soldier Council was led by Bohdan Hulewicz. Mieczysław Paluch became a representative of the Executive Division of the WSC at the 5th Army Corps command. The members of the organisation therefore gained control of fundamental decisive issues concerning military affairs in the capital of the region.

Soon after the attack on the City Hall, the PMOPP started to organise activities that were just as spectacular and risky. On 15 November, a failed attempt at occupying Fort IX was made. Three days later, Polish soldiers failed to occupy the military barracks behind Brama Dębińska. On the other hand, a bold action, the goal of which was to steal 80 kilogrammes of files concerning new German formations ended successfully. Furthermore, the Poles managed to prevent the

stealing of gold from a branch of the Reich's Bank, and occupied the barracks with military equipment on Rycerska (later: F. Ratajczaka) street, the guardhouse in Młyńska street and the Uniforms Office in the district of Jeżyce, on Nollendorfa (Jackowskiego) street. Radio operator Stanisław Jóźwiak, who served at the Cytadela radiostation, was a valuable "asset" for the organisation. Now the conspirators could gain access to correspondence exchanged between the German command in Poznań and the authorities in Berlin. Over time, a group of conspirators, determined activists gathered around Władysław Zakrzewski, Mieczysław Paluch and Bohdan Hulewicz, was formed. They started to consider the possibility of forming a secret staff for the future uprising. They were called the Paluch Group or the Secret Military Staff. In reality, however, the role of the team was not as it had been planned, it was therefore soon neutralised by inspectors from the Commissariat of the SPC. It may basically be assumed that the "staff" existed only in the hopes and imaginations of the organisers. However, Paluch and his partners certainly did not lack creativity, determination and resolve.

Before the outbreak of the uprising. Diplomatic relations

The Greater Poland Uprising should be considered with reference to the diplomatic situation in 1918-1919 and the circumstances that occurred in the Polish lands. Contrary to common judgements and opinions on Poland's exceptional role in Europe, during the Great War we were not a subject, but rather an object of international

politics, which, to a large degree, resulted not from our national traits, but from our geopolitical location which involved the lands on the Vistula and Warta rivers in nearly all larger European conflicts. Firstly, in 1914, the invaders wanted to attract subjects of Polish nationality. From the Russian side, the attractive factor was the manifesto of Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, in which he promised that the memory of Poland would be kept, if the inhabitants of the Kingdom decided to support the Romanovs and Petersburg; soon afterwards, the Puławy Legion was formed. Austria-Hungary consented to the creation of the Polish Legions (despite the failure of the First Cadre Company's mission). The Germans waited until 5 November 1916 to establish, in cooperation with Vienna, the temporary Kingdom of Poland, composed of lands taken from Russia. Their intention was not to contribute to the rebirth of Poland, but rather to have access to as many recruits as possible. The Legions proved to be the longest-lasting, as despite the oath crisis in July 1917, over time they gave rise to the pro-independence tradition which later prevailed in the reborn Poland (not without the influence of the charismatic personality of Józef Piłsudski).

During the acts of war, as the situation related to the army was becoming clear in all three partitions, attitudes towards the Polish affair, or, above all, to Polish soldiers, were also changing, because the matter was of utmost importance to our allies. Under this rule, only in 1917, when the tsarist system in Russia fell and the threat of diplomatic interventions from Petersburg disappeared, were Poles allowed to form a Polish

army in France, commanded by General Józef Haller.

The situation of Poland did not change much at the end of the First World War. As soon as the armistice in Compiègne was signed, former conflicts and biases reappeared. Among the countries of the victorious coalition which were preparing themselves for the opening of the peace conference, two factions were visibly distinguished: the British one and the French one. The United States assumed the role of an intermediary who counted on economic profits after the war, especially since American divisions participated in the war on the Western Front (there were reasons to claim that the Americans actually saved the collapsing front). Italy clearly shared the side of the British, hoping for territorial benefits resulting from the breakup of Austria-Hungary. As a result, the Polish cause had only one honest and genuine ally: France. Let us add that France based its relations with Poland, not on sentimental reasons (since in politics there are no friends, only common interests), but on the obligation resulting from its policy. The rebirth of Poland, often portrayed in our country as a form of recognition or even homage to the Polish determination in fighting for independence, was actually a result of the fact that Europe was in a need of a relatively strong state that would separate Bolshevik Russia from the defeated Germany. On the other hand, a reborn Poland guaranteed the stability of the anti-German alliance, which was a necessity, if Berlin should want to take revenge for the 1918 disaster.

In the late autumn of 1918, the majority of

politicians from Poznań thought that a fait accompli based on an armed uprising may only bring harm to the Polish cause. Considering the balance of powers visible in Paris at that time, every unconsidered move of Polish diplomacy, caught between a rock and a hard place, could have an adverse impact on the border and on the political situation of the country being reborn. These concerns soon proved true during the Polish-Bolshevik war, when Poland was left on its own. At the beginning of December, however, information flew to Poznań that the Polish cause in Paris did not look good. In the files of Ignacy Jan Paderewski, stored in the Archive of New Acts in Warsaw, there is information concerning some secret signals sent from Paris to politicians from Poznań. The signals expressed the need to undertake “action aimed at stressing the will of society as to the nationality of specific lands”.

Starting an armed struggle on Polish lands annexed to the Reich would, however, entail a high diplomatic risk. The disclosure of these suggestions would be harmful to the image of France, and would deteriorate the position of the Poles to that of an undisciplined nation mistrustful towards western powers; a nation that, although still in the process of regaining its freedom, is already trying to impact the shape of Central Europe on its own. To achieve as much as possible, an uprising had to break out soon, while the German forces were in revolutionary chaos and while the Army subordinate to Ober-Ost command was far in the east. The people in the territory of the Prussian Partition, especially in Greater Poland, were morally ready for battle. It

was the organisational level of preparations that was insufficient. The greatest problem was that there were not enough experienced officers and commanders. Diplomatic concerns, expressed also in Warsaw, were visible in the position of Ignacy Jan Paderewski, manifested in Poznań between 26 and 31 December 1918.

In this situation, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council on the one hand decided to wait, and on the other strengthened its military and diplomatic contact with Warsaw. The uprising outbreak date was initially set at mid-January 1919.

As the weeks passed, the political situation of the lands of the Prussian Partition was becoming increasingly problematic. Unfortunately, the activity of the Polish and Greater Poland diplomats did not always correspond to their actual significance on the international scene – even despite spectacular speeches made at the peace conference by an excellent speaker and patriot, Roman Dmowski. They planned to liberate the territories of the Prussian Partition with the help of Józef Haller's army, which would head south from Gdańsk. Such an option would be viable, if an uprising broke out in Pomerania. The possibility of starting action in Upper Silesia was also taken into consideration. At the end of 1918, however, these plans were unrealistic. Nevertheless, in December 1918, the decision was made in Poznań to establish two secret associations: the Military Organisation of Pomerania and the Polish Military Organisation of Upper Silesia. Similarly to the PMOPP, they were not officially linked to the Polish Military

Organisation based in Warsaw.

Time was apparently not on the side of the Polish pro-independence environment in the Prussian Partition. Despite links to Warsaw, political reasons prevented the possibility of geting any active help from the former Kingdom of Poland. As time passed, the revolutionary wave in Germany was slowly dying out, and military circles that wanted to gain control of the situation in the army and, if not continue the war in a hopeless effort, then at least restore order in a country, the fate of which was uncertain, given the prospect of having to sign a peace treaty, were gaining strength. Fewer soldiers were leaving the army, people eagerly joined numerous voluntary formations that, at least temporarily, ensured protection from an uncertain fate in civilian life. Regiments and battalions were returning to their garrisons, reinforcing the German military advantage. In a few weeks' time it would be too late. Meanwhile, although in the People's Guard and in the Worker and Soldier Council there were volunteers driven by their patriotic spirits, there were too few experienced high-ranked commanders to wage an armed struggle. Success was an option in a town or in a poviat, but any further idea of how the fight should develop was rather blurry. In such cases, sometimes fate comes to the rescue.

In 1914, there was nothing that would suggest the occurrence of favourable circumstances. Despite the outbreak of war, the German side still oppressed the Polish people. Furthermore, the relations between Polish soldiers and German officers on the front were generally far from

friendly. Only in the course of war, when it became clear that the conflict would last longer, did the situation slowly start to change. A brotherhood of arms appeared between the soldiers of Polish and German origin, which, however, did not change the pro-independence hopes of the Greater Poland residents.

The situation in a country, where the living conditions were deteriorating and the awareness of the Reich's inevitable demise was rising, was different. Starting from 1917, from the elimination of Russia from the war and from the failures of the German offensives on the Western Front in particular, the underground resistance started to emerge in Greater Poland. "Polish leave", from which soldiers did not return to the front, and desertion were becoming more and more common. In the region there was a large number of soldiers feigning illnesses and deserters – people who received military training and had war experience, but did not want to return to the front during the reign of Emperor William. They waited for the situation to develop further. The phenomenon was quite frequent, although not as common as was often described in memoirs and publications concerning the Greater Poland Uprising. In the civil circles of individual towns "shadow cabinets" were formed. These were secret Polish civil committees whose members would assume functions in administrative bodies and in the economy, if the German reign should break down. The education received in German schools was sufficient to assume such obligations, at least at the initial stage. The most fervent spirits were among the

youth (mainly the scouts and members of “Sokół”) and conscripts who had passed military training, but had not been to the front or seen the atrocities of war yet. In February 1918, the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition was formed. Apart from its name (similarly to the later established Military Organisation of Pomerania), it did not have anything in common with the Warsaw-based Polish Military Organisation.

In November 1918 and after the outbreak of the revolution in Germany, the discipline of the German army on the Western Front broke down, and in the following weeks until the late winter of 1919, the Berlin authorities actually lost control of events in the Poznań province. At that time, the Germans had to handle a revolution within their own country and were concerned about the attitude of Greater Poland, which was the Reich’s agricultural base. For the Poles, it was an excellent opportunity to stand up for the rights they had been deprived of for the previous decades. Polish organisations, operating in the province, and civil committees became very active (although they still remained underground). On 11 November, the Executive Division of the Worker and Soldier Council was formed. Two days later, the Council was dominated by Poles as the result of a coup. Members of the PMOPP began gathering weapons and units of the People’s Guard and the Guard and Security Service were formed. Officially, their composition complied with the parity rule. In reality, their members were mostly Poles. In Ostrów Wielkopolski, a Polish unit was formed too early.

After the intervention of the Commissariat of the SPC, it had to temporarily pass the border of the Kingdom of Poland and was then transformed into a Border Battalion which was accommodated in Szczypiorno.

The course of events accelerated on 3-5 December 1918, when the Partition Sejm of Poznań held its meetings in Poznań. The Supreme People's Council, with a six-member executive body - the Commissariat - was officially established. Taking advantage of the passiveness and confusion of a German administration that was not receiving any specific guidelines from Berlin, the Poles in Poznań and in many others towns in the region were gradually taking the initiative. Meanwhile, the Commissariat of the SPC was still conducting negotiations with Berlin. The talks, with interruptions, were continued even after the outbreak of the uprising, over the next several weeks. Tension was growing in the region. The atmosphere got tense as people waited for events that would impact the future of Greater Poland.

Ignacy Jan Paderewski's arrival in Poznań in the evening of 26 December, and the demonstrations organised on this occasion caused an even greater surge in the patriotic spirit, which was skilfully fuelled by Polish patriotic circles. Paderewski, who came to the capital of Greater Poland to participate in talks concerning the future of the territories of the Prussian Partition after the signing of the peace treaty, avoided being associated with the sentiments in Poznań. He represented the authorities of Warsaw, thus associating the situation in Poznań with

Paderewski would cause serious harm to the Polish affair at the peace conference in Paris. The official version was, therefore, that the artist fell ill and could not leave the “Bazar” hotel, where he was staying, until the end of the year.

On the next day, 27 December 1918, a ceremonious children’s parade in honour of Paderewski was organised in front of the “Bazar” Hotel, while the German side was preparing its reaction to the events in the city. In the late afternoon, a jingoistic march walked the streets of Poznań. The march was joined by soldiers from the Jeżyce-based 6th Grenadier Regiment. The most active demonstrators vandalised Polish buildings on which the flags of allied states were hung. Having done the same with the seat of the Commissariat of the SPC, they finally reached the Bazar. Here, the march was stopped by the Polish People’s Guard. As the tension grew and as the night got darker, a shot was heard. Although it is not clear who fired it or who was the target, the shot sparked further events. Both sides, although probably the Germans more so, were surprised by the course of events.

The situation initially spiralled out of control, but Polish units of the People’s Guard and the Guard and Security Service reacted quickly. Over the next two days, the centre of Poznań was cleared of German military units. The railway station was occupied and military transports intended to help the Germans were stopped. Polish soldiers took the Citadel, the forts surrounding the city and the barracks – except for the barracks of the 6th Grenadier Regiment (the unit left the city only after the conclusion of an agreement, which

happened a short while later). A fierce exchange of fire also took place by the Police Headquarters, before the building was abandoned by German soldiers. The last armed event in Poznań was the conducting of an organised action to occupy the Ławica Air Base on 6 January 1919.

The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council initially thought that the uprising had broken out too early. Its members had provided for the possibility of undertaking military actions, but they had been planned for mid-January, as this is when an officer with a high rank, who would take command of the Greater Poland armies, would come to Poznań from Warsaw. Talks on the subject had been going on for quite a long time. The suddenness of the action, however, resulted in the necessity of taking control of the growth of the movement. On 28 December, Major Stanisław Taczak - an officer who found himself in Poznań by accident and had, from the very start, emphasised that his service here was merely temporary - became Commander-in-Chief of Military Forces in the Prussian Partition. Over the next two weeks, he organised the Central Command from scratch, took control of the events outside Poznań, set out a plan of further actions and started the process of forming an insurgent army.

In the same evening, news of the events that had taken place in Poznań on 27 December was communicated by phone to the farthest places of the region. Several centres, from which the insurgent movement started to spread to the nearest towns, were immediately established. These towns included: Czarnków, Gniezno,

Gostyń, Grodzisk Wlkp., Kościan, Krotoszyn, Ostrów Wlkp., Szamotuły, Śrem, Środa Wlkp., Wągrowiec and Września. Power in them was taken over by poviat people's councils (finally legal since December), while local units of the People’s Guard and the Guard and Security Service transformed into insurgent companies with regional names. In smaller centres, insurgent units were formed spontaneously. After the takeover of power in their town, they set off to liberate the nearby areas. Polish priests, land-owners and social and national activists played a significant role in these activities. The units often acted instinctively, without any plan. The rotation of their members was extremely high, which is why today it is impossible to make a full list of the participants of the first, spontaneous stage of the Greater Poland Uprising. The activity of the Polish volunteers depended mostly on the number of Polish inhabitants. The closer it was to the borders of the region, the more difficult action was due to the activity of the local Germans who had often been relocated here as a result of Berlin’s former policy. As time passed, local units of Heimatschutz-Ost and Grenzschutz, together with soldiers from units forced to abandon their garrisons, were becoming increasingly troublesome while preparing themselves for offensive action.

The spontaneous stage of the Greater Poland Uprising lasted until mid-January 1919. During that time, the insurgents managed to occupy the greater part of the area that had been in the power of the Commissariat of the Supreme People’s Council. A specific, Greater Poland

insurgent state was established, which existed in practice until the validation of the Treaty of Versailles in January 1920.

The Greater Poland Uprising was inevitable. At the same time, it was preceded by over a hundred years of thoughtful and reasonable preparation.

Select Pages

1
2
3
4
5
6

Ostrzeliwanie pociągu niemieckiego w Chodzieży