

# Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

<https://greaterpolanduprising.eu/pwe/history/insurgent-troops/3351,The-participation-of-women-in-the-Greater-Poland-Uprising.html>  
25.04.2024, 23:07

## The participation of women in the Greater Poland Uprising

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The backyard of the uprising

When writing about the Greater Poland Uprising, one must take a closer look at its backyard.

Behind the organised and armed insurgent units, there was an army composed of Greater Poland

inhabitants who spontaneously joined the pro-independence movement and supported it with their work and financial resources. The spiritual dimension of the support was also of great significance. The awareness that the whole of society supported the insurgents boosted their will to fight and brought faith in victory. One must, however, take into account not only the activities during the uprising, but also everything that had happened before it broke out and had significantly contributed to the effectiveness of the movement. Let us also remember about years of preparations, which proved that, despite having stayed under occupation for over 120 years, the residents of Greater Poland were a community aware of their national origin. This came as a surprise to the Prussian authorities, who expected that after decades of Germanisation and Kulturkampf, the population living in the Poznań province would be entirely deprived of their national identity. The backyard of the uprising, which is the subject of this present publication, is therefore seen not only from a material, but also from a spiritual perspective, an essential part of which were the initiatives and activities undertaken by women

### Grassroots work

The 19th and 20th century women living in Greater Poland had an immense impact on shaping the patriotic attitudes of the generations they raised. Mothers, sisters, aunts and women who were professional educators moulded young organisms, bringing them up in the spirit of patriotism and love for their home country, which, although not visible on the maps of Europe, was

fostered in memory and daily life. Young Poles, educated in Prussian elementary schools and prevented from any contact with Polish culture and language, could easily lose their national identity. The Polish women, however, took a number of initiatives aimed at intensifying the contact with the Polish language and culture. Families cared about cultivating Polish traditions and rituals and national and religious holidays were solemnly celebrated. The Catholic faith, in the form of catechism classes and praying in Polish, was also an element that distinguished the Polish community from the Germans, who were Protestants. Children were taught Polish and history and toddlers were told ancient legends. Women often kept souvenirs of the pre-Partition Poland, walls in the houses of richer families were decorated with the portraits of the most noble Poles and reproductions of Matejki's and Grottger's paintings, while Polish literature, including the works of Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Sienkiewicz, was collected, shared and read. Polish poetry was recited and songs were taught and sung during family and national celebrations. It should be borne in mind, that parents or older siblings were often punished for "Polish behaviour".

As well as the initiatives taken at homes, action on a larger scale was also undertaken. In 1894, the open Mutual Support of Friends and Child Care Association "Warta" was established. It focused on helping poor and disabled children from Poznań, but was also a secret school functioning in the private homes of women who were members of the Association. "Classes",

supervised by female tutors and inspectors, were attended by from five to a dozen children. The Association educated Polish teaching staff, developed curricula and published Polish handbooks. Members of "Warta" were often punished for their activity. The founder of "Warta", Aniela Tułodziecka, for her series of "Conversations for Polish Mothers" was brought before a court and sentenced to 12 days of imprisonment.

In December 1910, on the initiative of Ludwika Turnowa née Mycielska, the Association of Female Landowners from Greater Poland and Pomerania, with its seat in Poznań, was founded. The Association's activity focused on those affairs related to education and economy, but its primary objectives were patriotic education and opposition to Germanisation in the closest environment, mostly among women and children. The women belonging to the Association organised or secretly supported the teaching of the Polish language to children, established child-care centres and libraries, organised lectures for village women and knitting classes for girls, etc. They also taught Polish songs and poems and celebrated national anniversaries, doing all this in a secret and private form. During World War I, they focused on helping families whose fathers and sons were fighting in the war. They collected food and clothing for the poor and took care of the homeless and the orphans.

Singing societies were a somewhat less obvious form of fighting for independence, but in the Partition period, songs were like weapons, because they sang about national affairs.

Furthermore, singing in a group strengthened the patriotic spirit. The Prussian authorities were aware of this and frequently imposed punishment on choirs and musical societies. The list of forbidden songs, published in February 1911, included 244 musical pieces.

The People's Libraries Society was also very active - permanent and mobile libraries, based on the rule of exchanging books between individual locations, were set up. Activities organised for children included reading fairy tales and stories, nativity plays, amateur theatres and "living word" events. Women, landowners in particular, also founded independent reading rooms to popularise reading among rural women.

In the second half of the 19th century, the idea of gymnastic exercise came to Poland, and in 1884 the first "Sokół" ("Falcon") nest in the Prussian Partition was founded in Inowrocław. In 1909, Ksawery Zakrzewski set up a female division of "Sokół" (the first female societies had been established before, but they were dissolved due to non-compliance with the Societies Act). The girls, similarly to the boys and men, exercised gymnastics and took part in gymnastic shows and conventions. Events were organised, including dancing parties, theatre plays, patriotic evenings, exhibitions, etc. Classes in Polish, history, national literature and geography were held. Excursions focused around these subjects were also organised. After the outbreak of World War I, the process of preparing for the fight for independence became the prevailing subject of classes. Women learnt field and sanitary services - Doctor Zakrzewski organised the first sanitary

courses for them. Successive courses were organised by the women who had previously completed his training, including a direct continuator of his activity, Janina Łakińska.

In 1912, on the initiative of the activists from "Sokół", the first scout patrols and troops were set up in Poznań. The first female scout patrol was formed on 29 November 1912. In 1913, it was transformed into a girl-scout troop with Emilia Plater as its patron. The organisation of female scouting was supported by an instructor from Lviv, Jadwiga Falkowska. Scouting promoted a woman's role that was different from the one known and taught so far. It gave initiative to women. Campfires were organised, during which patriotic stories were told. During their field activities, girl-scouts were trained in intelligence, courier service, communication and sanitary service. Outdoor games taught them how to behave while performing intelligence-related tasks. Girl-scouts from Poznań helped the young conspirators from the UNIA organisation in a number of activities. One of their joint activities, which lasted practically throughout the entire period preceding the uprising, was following undercover policemen. In cooperation with the Red Cross, girl-scouts also did charity work. Other events included protests, pro-independence demonstrations or the distribution of leaflets with patriotic information most often concerning national anniversaries.

In 1864, the Red Cross, a humanitarian movement to help people who need medical aid, was founded. In Greater Poland under Prussian occupation, the authorities did not allow for the

establishment of a similar Polish organisation. The situation after 1916, however, required the provision of care services and first-aid to Polish soldiers returning from the front, who were often disabled, and also to Polish civilians returning as a result of war. As well as medical aid, they also provided material support - food, clothing and medication. In early November 1918, the first Polish branch of the Red Cross was founded, inspired by a group of doctors from the department of medicine at the Society of Friends of Arts and Sciences. Preparatory courses at the Institute run by the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, the Gąsiorowskis Orthopaedic Institute in the district of Łazarz and the Institute run by the Sisters of Mercy on Bernardine Square were launched. An important person for the Poznań branch of the Red Cross was Izabela Drwęska née Amrogowicz, who co-organised bonfires at the Poznań Central Station for returning Polish soldiers and civilians. After the outbreak of the uprising, she set up a unit of the Red Cross composed of the women who had been involved in the organisation of the bonfires. She became its Chairperson. She was an advocate of a practical approach to women's medical and sanitary service in Poznań. A great number of women from the Poznań unit of the Red Cross were active in sanitary teams, providing help in local hospitals.

#### The sanitary and medical services

When the uprising broke out, the sanitary and hospital services were dominated by women. Women from different environments, from families representing the bourgeoisie, the working class, the landed gentry and peasants,

were all involved in care and sanitary work. Some women, or rather girls, had been suitably trained at the above-mentioned courses before the outbreak of the uprising.

Barbara Łazarkiewicz, a participant of the courses organised by "Sokół", during the uprising served at the field hospital in Szubin. Waleria Solińska, who had completed girl-scouts' courses, also worked as a medical orderly, similarly to Zofia Szyfter, who in October 1918 joined the Polish Military Organisation, where she worked as a courier and a medical orderly. After the outbreak of the uprising she was directed to the Hospital of the Transfiguration in Poznań.

Zofia Tucholska worked in the Red Cross ambulance in Jeżyce, while girl-scouts Konstancja Kolska, Anna Muchalewska, Marianna Sobczyńska and many more helped at Poznań hospitals.

Some of the women who joined the uprising had undergone sanitary training under different circumstances during the First World War. As they had experience in the field, they actively helped the injured, organised hospitals and trained new orderlies. Stanisława Łagierska-König was a good example of this. Due to her good knowledge of German, she completed her training at the German Red Cross. When the uprising broke out, she helped the injured during the first battles, and went on to organise sanitary posts and helped to transport the injured from the front line to Czarnków. The service of Anna Szczepaniak was similar. After her mother's death, she was taken in by her sister who lived in

Germany. Later, she moved to Egypt to recover. In 1915, during the war, she was expelled by the English and taken in by the German Red Cross, which, having trained her, sent her to Turkey. After her return to Poznań, in the first days of the uprising she started work as a medical orderly.

Magdalena Mańczak, a certified nurse who, after returning from Vienna, on 3 January 1919 was assigned by Poznań Military Command to the military hospital in Krotoszyn, also took part in the uprising. In Krotoszyn, she worked as a nurse in the operating room and brought the injured from the front in Zduny to the hospital, in cooperation with Doctor Robińska.

There were other female doctors who participated in the uprising, although there were very few of them. One of them was Emilia Hanke - doctor of medicine, a rheumatologist and social activist, who was an assistant doctor on the western front.

When the uprising broke out, the demand for medical orderlies grew so rapidly that, as well as medically trained persons, all volunteers were accepted to sanitary service, even untrained women who gained experience while working as medical orderlies.

At the same time, training courses were still organised by spontaneously formed units of the Red Cross, which in March 1919, during the uprising, were brought together to form the Polish Red Cross.

Activities undertaken by the women involved in sanitary service included giving first aid to

injured insurgents and transporting them in ambulances to dressing points or field hospitals. They took care of the injured and the disabled also during their stay in hospitals or rehabilitation centres. They also set up small field hospitals, where they took care of issues related to administration, supplies and cleaning. As access to dressings and bandages was very difficult, they frequently made them themselves by tearing bed linen, donated by local people, into strips. As well as the typical sanitary work, they also cared about their patients' mental condition by comforting them and keeping their spirits up.

In Miejska Górka, Agnieszka Mikus with her friends Hajducka, Anderszówna, Malinowska and Garstecka cleaned up a school indicated by a town councillor and prepared places for the insurgents to sleep. In this improvised hospital, they worked as medical orderlies, taking care of the injured brought from Rawicz.

Maria Dutkiewicz with her sisters Monika and Wojciecha were in Rogoźno when the uprising broke out. They set up an improvised hospital in a local secondary school. They collected the soldiers injured on the front in Budzyn from the railway station.

The Krzywín unit of the Red Cross, organised and trained by Antoni Wilkowski, accompanied the Krzywín Company in occupying Wolsztyn. There were 4 medical orderlies in the unit: Czesława Biskupska, Maria Maćkowiak-Sobkowiak, Stanisława Nowak-Porankiewicz and Maria Werblewicz-Szymaniak.

In November 1918, Pelagia Łukomska set up a unit of the Polish Red Cross in Śmigiel, and, later, a dressing point for injured insurgents in the German hospital run by deaconesses. In the hospital, Polish medical orderlies were persecuted by the German staff who prevented them from carrying out their duties.

On the initiative of Wanda Niegolewska, a field hospital was set up in Buk, where the injured from the Western Front were treated. Niegolewska personally supervised the hospital's work and provided support to the families of the injured. Other medical orderlies working there were, among others, Klara Błaszczynska and Władysława Gmerek.

During the uprising, Maria Kurnatowska's mansion in Gościeszyn was a supply base for the insurgents and, at the same time, a place where the injured were treated. Kurnatowska supervised its activity in person. Her two daughters worked at the hospital in Wolsztyn.

The mansion in Łabiszyn, owned by Maria Skórzewska, was also strategically significant to the defence of a section of the nearby front. In the mansion, the countess organised a Red Cross unit, which treated the injured brought to Łabiszyn.

It is also worth noting that 12 women were involved in the production of medication and dressings at the Sanitary Depot in Poznań. Marianna Sobczyńska, a nurse with the rank of sergeant, worked there.

## Organisation of food and supplies

The discussion on the backyard of insurgent activities and women's participation in them should also cover the issues of providing food and supplies. The beginnings of the insurgents' nutrition date back to the above-mentioned "Bonfires" at the Central Station. Later, Izabela Drwęska set up several more kitchens and points where meals were served. However, access to food was limited. In 1916, a ration card system was introduced, which quickly covered basic food products. Every day meal served in the kitchens was thus composed merely of coffee, soup and bread.

When the uprising broke out, Kazimierz Chmielewski, a pharmacist and a medical orderly, became head of supplies, being assisted mostly by women. In the first days of the uprising, before the Polish provision system was introduced, the kitchens of the Red Cross provided food to the entire army in Poznań and in the forts. In only several hours, mobile kitchens, which drove the streets of Poznań and served meals to the soldiers, were set up. A few permanent kitchens were also established. One of them, managed by Miss Milewska, was located in the "Bazar" - Chmielewski maintained it with his own funds. The second one, led by Ms Górska, was in her father's Grand Cafe in Wolności Square. One of the girls who worked there was 17-year old Irena Buszkiewicz, from a family of merchants. She, together with her friends who were also scouts, helped to peel potatoes. There was a third kitchen, in the National Museum, which was set up by Helena Rymarowicz and insurgent

Ruciński, thanks to the transport of donated food. More than ten girl-scouts and other female volunteers immediately got involved in working in the kitchen. In the castle there was a kitchen run by Halina Łebińska, while the kitchen in the police station building was managed by Teresa Pawlicka. More such places were set up later, among others on the premises of the Municipal Slaughterhouse.

Women who were not involved in work at any of the official kitchens helped as much as they could. These were women like Rozalia Nogaj née Chwiałkowska with her daughters and friends. Rozalia sent the girls to the insurgents with food. The girls, not being afraid of gunfire, tried to get the food directly to the places where the insurgents were fighting.

Another important issue was providing the kitchens with the necessary supplies. The outbreak of the uprising resulted in even more limited access to food. However, the entire general society was involved in finding it. Food products were donated by merchants, bakers, butchers, craftsmen - everyone who could, spontaneously gave what they could. Landowners played a significant role in providing food.

Although soldiers were often the chefs in these kitchens, women were responsible for the entire service. In Opalenica, an assembly point for soldiers was located at a railway station which is why a kitchen was set up there. It was run by Borowski, and Helena Woziwodzka with her sister and W. Drażanka assisted by serving the meals. Pelagia Klukowska and her sisters served hot tea

and coffee to the insurgents passing through Wągrowiec. Other products they prepared for them were cigarettes, which they made of tobacco taken from Polish cigars. Another woman who worked as a field cook was Maria Konieczna who got injured when she was on duty.

A food service point for the insurgents was set up in the house of the Budny family, and in the laundry facility in their yard. The place was managed by Ms Wichlińska from Helenowo. The food was provided by local estates - Tuczo, Helenowo, Kobylniki and others. Together with her sister, Ostrowska, Ms. Wichlińska personally visited the food service points, checking them and making lists of necessary products. They also frequently helped with cooking and distributing meals.

In a school in Miejska Górka, Felicja Pietruszyńska organised accommodation for nearly 80 insurgents. She also cooked for them, initially in a laundry boiler, and later in a field kitchen (taken from the Germans), which was set up in the yard of her parents' farm.

When the fighting for Zbąszyń started, Wanda Niegolewska immediately organised the supply of food to the section - every evening, a transport of food products, which included jugs with coffee, milk, sugar, bread and lard, was sent from Niegolewo. Maria Kurnatowska from Gościeszyn also delivered food to the insurgents and arranged means of transport.

The communication and reconnaissance services

Communication between the conspirators and the insurgents who were still in hiding, as well as between the units established later, was of immense significance. Back then, there were still very few telephone lines, therefore the information passing between the staff and the units, as well as between individual units, was transported by special couriers and runners. Many women were among these.

Occupying railway stations and post offices was a necessary condition for ensuring further command of the fronts and securing the flow of information and orders. Thus, to the insurgents, women telephonists were “controllers”, supervising all of the telephone and telegraph connections, etc. By intercepting German reports, they often gained access to valuable information and details concerning the locations of enemy units. Then, via secret lines, they passed the information on to the conspirators. They were also intermediaries allowing contact between the conspirators. Female telegraphists working at railway stations did similar work.

25-year-old Maria Hundt worked as a courier at a post office. Through a secret field line connected to a telephone exchange, she provided the insurgents with information on the location of German Grenschutz units. She was later turned in by another employee of the post office – a German woman, and brought before a court. Owing to the intervention of the uprising’s authorities, the People’s Bank in Kępno bailed her out and she was released until the next trial. In the meantime, the uprising came to an end and the Germans left Greater Poland.

The Budny sisters were runners who helped the insurgents - Kazimiera, who was merely 14 years old, and her 18-year-old sister Zofia. It was their father who involved them in conspiracy activities after his return from the front. Kazimiera and Zofia passed reports and letters from their father to his collaborators, including Priest Bajerlein, Wichliński from Tuczno, and the Wichliński family from Helenowo. He also asked them to try to acquire information from the Germans staying in Inowrocław concerning the location of their armies. Their excellent command of the language allowed them to successfully pretend they were German.

Klara Słowińska, who came from a peasant family, was also a courier and a runner. As a 12-year-old, she became a runner for the Łabiszyn company commanded by Second Lieutenant Tadeusz Fabian. She was accepted into the company together with her father. She passed reports during the battles near Antoniewo, Rudy and Rynarzewo, as well as during insurgent activities on the outskirts of Bydgoszcz and by the Noteć river. She also delivered letters to families, as well as food and clothing to the insurgents. She was very brave and frequently carried reports along the firing line. During an artillery attack on her home village, she was wounded. Despite immediate help and transport to the hospital, she had to have one of her legs amputated.

Another woman who was wounded in the uprising was Franciszka Kasprzak. She regularly passed information on the number and movement of armies to Żurczyn, where the insurgents were staying. When the Germans discovered what she

was doing, she had to escape, and stepped on a mine.

In Zduny, Julianna Bujakiewicz née Snadna, a girl from a peasant family, was a courier with an insurgent unit. She passed reports between the unit's command in Zduny and the post in Borowica. During an attack on a Grenschutz post, she was arrested and threatened with the death penalty. She was saved thanks to the intervention of her mother, who, on her behalf, appealed to the Regional Court in Wrocław and proved that Julianna had provided medical aid not only to Polish insurgents, but also to a German second lieutenant.

Zofia Angierska worked at a railway station in Rogoźno Wielkopolskie as a telegrapher. She carried out tasks for the Rogoźno Company commanded by Lieutenant Zieliński, and her task was to transfer information to the insurgents in the Budzyń - Chodzież section, and, at the same time, prevent the Germans from contacting each other. When the Germans found out about it, she was dismissed.

Leokadia Degórska was employed at a post office in Pniewy, where she was responsible for supervising the work of the office. Her task was to prevent German office clerks from sabotaging the work of the communication services. She also maintained contact with the insurgent units and between the staff and the units staying on the front near Międzychód.

Landowner Zofia Sokolnicka also passed information. She was an emissary between

Greater Poland and the Central Polish Agency in Lausanne, and later the Polish National Committee in Paris. Her excellent memory allowed her to pass information and instructions for political activists and organisations in Poznań without any written notes.

The insurgents received information not only from the women who worked for them as couriers, but also from the ones who incidentally came across information that might have some importance in the context of the uprising, and who considered it their duty to share it with the commanders of the uprising. Their solidarity with the insurgents and their feeling of national identity was undoubtedly a common thing.

Other women whose help was priceless during the uprising were Jadwiga Ligarzewska and Zofia Kryger. After the men from Rynarzewo were interned and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp by the Prussian Grenschutz units, they started their work at a local post office. However, they got real recognition for accompanying the soldiers on the front line, when they became leaders of a group of women whose tasks included digging trenches.

### Organisation and equipment

A considerable contribution to the organisation of the uprising was made by female landowners, who, as well as their merits in the areas described above, helped the insurgents in many other ways. Maria Kurnatowska was a co-organiser of the Gościeszyn troop, which she provided with weapons. Aleksandra Bukowiecka, on the other hand, co-founded the Lubiń Company. She also

allowed insurgent units to use the rooms and stables in her estate, and funded the purchase of weapons and ammunition. Countess Skórzewska, Lady of Łabiszyn and Lubostroń, allowed them to use sleds, which made it possible to transport entire companies to sections that were under threat.

Other activities carried out in the background of the uprising included the registration of insurgents and the conscription of soldiers returning from Germany. Women were commonly involved in these activities. In Bydgoszcz, there was a special unit of the People's Council, led by Stefania Tuchułkowa, Apolonia Ziółkowska and Wincentyna Teskowa, that handled the conscription process and purchased weapons and smuggled them to the insurgents fighting near Rynarzewo.

Women were also engaged in providing the soldiers with uniforms. When the uprising broke out, its participants wore Prussian uniforms, and women were responsible for altering them. They removed the German collars, cuffs and epaulettes, and replaced them with Polish elements - a red and white rosette or band.

Women also spontaneously made national flags and hung them to manifest their patriotism and solidarity with the insurgents. They also embroidered standards. When the insurgents won their first battle in Osieczna, Maria Kopańska sneaked into the town council, tore off the black fabric from the Prussian flag that was inside, and hung the "Polish" flag on the Osieczna town hall.

In memory

The entirety of the work done by women, although frequently carried out in the background of military actions, immensely contributed to the success of the uprising. All of the support, pre-organised and spontaneous, that the women provided to the insurgents raised their spirits and their will to fight. The supplies and medical services provided to the insurgents were a priceless security measure, while the information passed on by runners and couriers saved many lives. However, the women who served to support the uprising did not perceive their work as something heroic, but rather as their patriotic duty. Only now, in hindsight, are we able to see that the role they played in the uprising was in fact crucial. Their seemingly simple and trivial tasks required immense amounts of work and effort, which they received no reward for. Hardly anyone noticed it back then, and that is why very few of them wrote down their memories of those events. It makes the stories of the ones who survived even more valuable. At the same time, let us bear in mind that the stories described in the present publication are just a small selection. The backyard of the uprising was, to a large extent, paved by female hands. We must not forget this, because in discussions concerning the Greater Poland Uprising the contribution of women is too often underestimated.

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