

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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THE BATTLES FOR ŻNIN, ŁABISZYN AND ZŁOTNIKI KUJAWSKIE AND THE SECOND BATTLE OF SZUBIN 11 - 12 January 1919

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The sharp deterioration in the situation on the Northern Front after the defeat in the first battle of Szubin on 8 January 1919 and the clear German wedge in the area of Żnin and Łabiszyn meant that the Polish command had to prepare a counter-offensive in the north-eastern region of Greater Poland. The author of the plan of the offensive was the head of staff of the Northern Front, Second Lieutenant Mieczysław Paluch, and the plan was approved by Lieutenant Colonel Grudzielski and by Central Command. On 10 January, a briefing of the commanders of those units which were to take part in the offensive in the direction of Żnin, Szubin and Łabiszyn took place in Gniezno.

Though the goal set for the planned operation was quite broad in scope, it consisted of several separate ventures. Above all, the goal to be accomplished included the seizure of Żnin, Szubin, Łabiszyn and Złotniki Kujawskie, which would then eliminate the wedge that posed a threat for Wągrowiec, Gniezno and Inowrocław and had become a danger for the uprising. The most spectacular action involved the seizure of Żnin, which would at the same time be the starting point for further action. It was hoped that the Germans would send some of their forces stationed in Szubin and Łabiszyn to defend this southernmost section, and this, in turn would relieve the insurgent units which were entrusted with the task of seizing these towns. The

following units were designated to fight for Żnin:

a. the Eastern Group (commander: Marceł Cieśliski) composed of:

- the Żnin-Gniezno unit (commander: Marceł Cieśliski),*
- the Mogilno unit (commander: Stanisław Roloff),*
- a cavalry unit from Gniezno (commander Mazurek - his first name is unknown),*

In total: 332 soldiers

Area of concentration of this group: Podgórzyn, a town situated south-east of Żnin.

b. the Western Group (commander: Jan Tomaszewski) composed of:

- a unit from Poznań (commander: Józef Bogacki),*
- a unit from Juncewo (commander: Stefan Kubiak),*
- two units of volunteers from the Żnin region (commanders: Stefan Adamski and Wojciech Anioła).*

In total: 737 soldiers.

Area of concentration of this group: Sarbinowo, west of Żnin.

The Germans had 300 soldiers at their disposal. They were armed with 6 light and 6 heavy machine guns, 2 mine launchers (grenade launchers, mortars) and one cannon. Commander:

Second Lieutenant Eckert.

Both groups left for their respective areas of concentration on 11 January 1919: the Eastern Group from Gařawa and the Western Group from Damasławek. The Eastern Group had a shorter distance to cover, but meanwhile, the task assigned to it was changed. Now it was not supposed to attack but only to block Źnin.

Ultimately, M. Cieřlicki took the decision to attack. To this end, he divided his group into four parts, deploying them as follows: west of the Źnin-Rydlewo crossroads, at the railway track east of Rydlewo, to the north west of the school in Podgórzyn, and in the south-western edge of the town of Góra. The group attacked Źnin, forcing the Germans to involve their reserve units.

Despite the fierce fighting and the infliction of serious losses on the enemy which resulted in a temporary seizure of the sugar plant, the insurgents did not manage to enter the town.

The western group in Sarbinowo split into three parts: the first one attacked along the road connecting Sarbinowo and Źnin, the second one along the Źnin-Wieř-Źnin section and the third one was sent to the north to safeguard the railway line to Bydgoszcz, east of Jaroszewo. The attack of this group started later than the attack of the group commanded by M. Cieřlicki, and also was not synchronised with the plans of the insurgent who attacked from the south and east, it ended in failure. During the night of 11 to 12 January, the Germans, being cut off from the surrounding areas and having no hope for reinforcements, left the town and retreated to Bydgoszcz. On 12 January, Źnin was taken by the

insurgents. Losses: 42 dead and about 100 wounded insurgents.

The fighting for Żnin clearly demonstrated all the features of the battles fought so far by the insurgents. There was no synchronisation of the activities of both groups and there was no joint commander of the entire action. The proper concept of the battle-plan was not implemented despite the sacrifices and involvement of ordinary soldiers. The final objective, i.e. the liberation of Żnin was accomplished, however, not as a result of direct fighting, but rather the effective encirclement of the city and the determination of the insurgents. Furthermore, the decisions of the command were not always consistent. The supposition must be made that a last-minute change in the concept of the entire operation took place, and the main burden of the fighting was shifted to the battle for Szubin. In the face of the seizure of Szubin and for fear of being surrounded, the fact of the possible departure of the Germans from Żnin was taken into account.

In order to take control of Łabiszyn (this direction was treated as secondary by the command) the insurgent forces started to concentrate in Barcin. The following units were gathered there:

- *from Kruszwica (commander: Second Lieutenant Kazimierz Dratwiński),*
- *from Pakość (commander: Sergeant Kazimierz Szmańda),*
- *from Barcin (commander: Corporeal Leon Krukowski).*

In total: 172 poorly armed people.

The commander of this action was Władysław Poczekaj.

The German crew in Łabiszyn consisted of one hundred soldiers, there are no specific details regarding these soldiers.

The Polish units were concentrated east of the town of Kania which itself is situated south of Łabiszyn. From there, on 11 January, the units marched out along the road connecting the towns of Kania and Łabiszyn. More or less in the area of Łabiszyn Wieś, the column was divided into smaller subunits, which encircled the town. After the closure of the ring from the north, the subunits which were present there, started their attack on the town. The sounds of shooting were at the same time a signal for the remaining units. The concentric, fast and determined attack from all directions at the same time, supported by information obtained from the local Polish residents led to the capitulation of the Germans and the seizure of Łabiszyn.

The battle for Łabiszyn was an interesting example of the decisiveness, and at the same time the creativeness of the insurgents. Second Lieutenant Dratwiński, who was not officially appointed commander, managed the action very efficiently, consulting all his activities with subordinate commanders. It is noteworthy that this was an arrangement between officers and non-commissioned officers, which was natural for a regular army. Both parties were experienced, were familiar with army service and understood

each other perfectly - and this brought specific results. As a result, success was achieved using a very simple but effective method, without any serious or unnecessary losses. In principle, this local action deserves greater attention and it is a pity that some historians almost completely ignore it.

The second battle of Szubin was the most important accent of the insurgent offensive of 11-12 January 1919. Undoubtedly Szubin was also the main German centre after repulsing a Polish attack three days before and taking control of Żnin and Łabiszyn. On the other hand, the Poles, as well as for strictly military reasons, treated the necessity to capture Szubin as a matter of ambition.

The Polish forces were divided into two strike groups and one cover group.

Group 1 (commander: Stanisław Śliwiński):

- *the Poznań Battalion,*
- *the Infantry Regiment from Września (commander: Zdzisław Beutler),*
- *a Heavy Machine Gun unit from Września (8 hmg, commander: Alojzy Nowak),*
- *2 Artillery Half-Batteries: 2 howitzers - commander: Kazimierz Niezychowski, 2 field cannons - commander: Tadeusz Fenrych*
- *sanitary service.*

In total: 783 soldiers.

Task: march along the road running from Żnin through Malice-Suchorecz-Słonawki-Słonawy-Grzecznapanna to the junction of the roads to Godzimirz and Szubin, and strike the city from the north.

Group 2:

- *the Infantry Regiment from Wyrzysk (commander: Teofil Spychała),*

- *a half-battery of howitzers (commander: Jan Chylewski).*

In total: About 200 people.

Task: to march from Kcynia through Zalesie and the Pińsko station to Wolwark and then attack Szubin from the west, along the axis of the road connecting Wolwark and Szubin. This was supposed to be an auxiliary strike.

Group 3 (cover) - commander: Zygmunt Kittel:

- *an infantry half-battalion from Gniezno,*

- *a heavy machine gun unit,*

- *a cavalry squadron from Poznań (commander: Kazimierz Ciążyński),*

- *a patrol of sappers from Poznań (commander: Second Lieutenant: Józef Sulerzyski),*

- *a half-battery of artillery (commander: Edward Brzeski).*

In total: 400 soldiers.

Task: to safeguard the march of the main strike

forces, control the area of Kołaczkowo by means of the cavalry squadron and to cover the approaches to the city from the north, from the area of Godzimierz Leśniczówka, using the forces of the Gniezno half-battalion and artillery.

Taking into account the strong resistance of the Germans, attempts were made to prepare the attack carefully; as heavy losses were expected, care was taken to organise the medical-sanitary aid. Both strike groups had their own first aid stations: group one in the Lachowice forest lodge and group two in the Pińsko manor farm. At each of these locations, a physician was available. The severely wounded insurgents were to be evacuated to the hospital in Kcynia by Lieutenant Doctor Drecki.

The German forces consisted of 400 soldiers. The commander of the Szubin defence was Second Lieutenant Dost. The forces were composed of:

- *an infantry subunit (about 400 soldiers),*
- *a German Civic Guard unit (commanders: Second Lieutenants Arno Mantey and Kisser),*
- *a machine gun unit (8 hmg and 9 lmg, commander: Second Lieutenant Härzer),*
- *a battery of field artillery (commander: Second Lieutenant Falkenhayn),*
- *a mariners unit (commander: Sergeant Göritz).*

The Poles had no idea how these forces were deployed.

The commander of the action was Lieutenant

Colonel Kazimierz Grudzielski, who was stationed together with his staff in Kcynia. The action was to be coordinated from Pińsko by head of staff of the Northern Front, Second Lieutenant Mieczysław Paluch.

On 11 January 1919, at 1.00 p.m. the howitzers of Jan Chylewski opened fire. This was the signal for the main first strike group to attack. During the fighting, cooperation between the infantry and machine gun units was skilfully used; the forces moved forward systematically, step by step, seizing the locations in the town which had been reinforced by the Germans: the windmill, the brickyard, the Catholic cemetery and the educational institution. Finally, the unit commanded by Zdzisław Beutler seized the building of the railway station - this was the last resistance point of the Germans in Szubin.

In general, the other groups also completed the tasks assigned to them, although, the cavalry unit commanded by K. Ciążyński did not break the railway tracks running in the direction of Bydgoszcz, which they were supposed do in accordance with their orders. However, the unit did manage to force an armoured train, coming from Bydgoszcz with reinforcements for the Germans, to get involved in the fighting. Finally, these forces were stopped at the station in Szubin. However, at the request of the commander of the front, the tracks were broken near Kołaczkowo to avoid any effective sorties of the enemy.

The unit commanded by Second Lieutenant Kittel which was covering Śliwiński's group, after a

skirmish with the Germans occupied Samokleşki Małe.

The second group did not take part in the direct attack. Entrenched on the eastern outskirts of the Wolwark village, it only got involved in the fighting with the Germans near Wolwark, while the artillery, commanded by Chylewski supported the attack of Śliwiński's group, without, however, even having any detailed information about how the situation was developing.

Losses: 26 dead and 29 wounded insurgents.

The second battle of Szubin, which ended with success, was undoubtedly one of the more properly planned and conducted operations. However, its greatest deficiencies were the almost "chronic" errors of the insurgents; activities: poor communication, the lack of any proper synchronisation of the activities of the respective groups, and the covering was not always effective. Elements of centralised command were present - however, not always effective.

The last battle of the insurgent offensive conducted on 11-12 January 1919 was the battle for Złotniki Kujawskie. The units commanded by Second Lieutenant Paweł Cymś, which were stationed in Inowrocław, were - in accordance with an order given by Lieutenant Colonel Kazimierz Grudzielski entrusted with the task of capturing the town.

The insurgent units were concentrated in Jaksice, situated south-east of Złotniki. The forces were

divided as follows:

First strike group (commanders: Stanisław Janowski and Lieutenant Stefan Meysner): 345 people armed, among other things, with one light machine gun.

Task: to march through Mierzwin and Krężoły and to occupy positions west of Złotniki Kujawskie between the Rucewo-Złotniki and Krężoły-Złotniki roads. On 11 January, at 14.00 - Attack Złotniki and ensure that the enemy occupiers of the town all get involved in the fighting.

Second strike group (commander: Mieczysław Słabęcki): about 290 soldiers with three heavy machine guns.

Task: to reach Gniewków, marching through Liskowo, Broniewo and Tupadły. Once there, to destroy the railway tracks of the line running to Bydgoszcz and cut off the connection with the city. Attack Złotniki from the north on 11 January, at 14.00. Furthermore, combat outposts were located in Tuczno, Jaksice and Niszczewice.

The German crew was composed of:

- *an infantry company (about 150 people),*
- *a machine gun unit (10 heavy and one light machine guns),*
- *a half-battery of field artillery (2 cannons).*

These forces were commanded by Second Lieutenant Eichenberg.

From the very beginning, the battle for Złotniki

Kujawskie went wrong - not in accordance with the agreed plan. The second strike group, near Broniewo, was discovered by a German patrol which managed to warn the rest of the Germans, and the Poles were perfectly aware of this fact. M. Słabęcki protected himself from the Bydgoszcz side with two units. The expected sounds of battle, which were supposed to mean that the first group had started their attack were not heard at 2.00 p.m., so, 40 minutes after this deadline the decision was taken to adopt a line formation and attack Złotniki. Despite the devotion and the skilful action taken by the insurgents on the battlefield, the attack was repulsed by the Germans.

The first strike group had gone off track during its march and as a result of this, it had occupied the agreed positions as late as 3.00 p.m. Instead of attacking Złotniki only from the west, the insurgents stretched out the front excessively to the north-west and as a consequence of this, during the attack, they moved to the rear of the right flank of the second group which was already fighting for the town. The presence of mind of one of the insurgents (Józef Wichliński from Tuczno) prevented a tragedy. The dairy and the railway warehouse were seized and soon control was taken of the entire town, except for the railway station building.

Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Cymś arrived in Złotniki and started to organise the attack on the railway station, but the well organised and skilfully commanded defence repulsed the successive attacks of the insurgents. It was as late as midnight of 11 to 12 January, during

concurrent negotiations, that the final attack was launched and at 1.30 a.m. Złotniki was finally liberated.

Polish acquisitions: 4 German officers and 80 soldiers were taken into captivity, 2 cannons 1 mine launcher (mortar) and 10 heavy machine guns were captured. Losses: 3 dead and 31 wounded insurgents.

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