

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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05.05.2024, 22:53

THE BATTLES ON THE NORTHERN FRONT BETWEEN KCYNIA AND ŁABISZYN 21 January - 17 February 1919

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In the second half of January and the first half of February 1919, battles were fought with particular intensity on the Northern Front

between Kcynia and Łabiszyn. Thus, this location once again became crucial to ensure that the insurgents' achievements were not lost. To break the Polish defence, the Germans involved nearly 3000 well-armed and equipped soldiers. By striking between Kcynia and Łabiszyn, they wanted to break through the defence line and get further into Greater Poland towards Gniezno, however, the army's morale was rather low. What is more, the Worker and Soldier Council from Bydgoszcz and a local Grenzschutz command delayed actions and obstructed the transport of food. The German plan of attack was as follows.

All the forces were divided into four assault groups and a reserve.

1. The first group: the 4th Grenzschutz Battalion (commander: Captain Just).

Task: to occupy Chmielniki, contact the right flank of German forces and attack Antoniewo and Nowa Wieś Wielka. The purpose of this manoeuvre was to draw attention away from the direction of the main attack.

2. The second group: the 1st Grenzschutz Battalion (commander: Major Schemmel).

the 2nd Grenzschutz Battalion (commander: Major Meisel).

Task: to attack and occupy Kcynia.

3. The third group:

- *unit (?) of the 14th Infantry Regiment (from Bydgoszcz) - commander: Rittmeister Scholl,*

- *Lieutenant von Greiffenberg's unit.*

Task: to occupy Szubin.

4. The fourth group:

- *the 4th Grenzschutz Battalion,*

- *a voluntary naval unit (commander: Lieutenant Parsenow).*

Task: to occupy Rynarzewo.

5. Reserve: the 2nd Grenzschutz Battalion
(commander: Captain Huber).

The offensive was commanded by General von Belov.

The Germans planned to break through the Polish defence line by occupying three towns which served as bases: Kcynia, Szubin and Rynarzewo.

The manoeuvre was intentional, because the 3000 men von Belov actually had at his disposal (in terms of numbers, it was merely an infantry regiment that was rather heterogeneous and in terms of value, it differed quite considerably from a regular formation) were not able to carry out offensive actions on an extended front which was more than 25 kilometres long. Occupying the main towns in the region would allow for the establishment of their own bases for a further attack towards Gniezno, and guaranteed safety in the event of success.

Polish intelligence managed to obtain information about the enemy's plans. This made it possible for Lieutenant Colonel K. Grudzielski, commander of the Northern Front, to prepare the defence. The

area that was to be attacked was divided into seven sections:

- *section 1, Inowrocław - commander: Second Lieutenant Paweł Cyms,*
- *section 2, Łabiszyn- commander: Captain Jan Tomaszewski*
- *section 3, Szubin, commander: also Captain Jan Tomaszewski*
- *section 4, Kcynia - commander: Second Lieutenant Konrad Golniewicz,*
- *section 5, Margonin - commander: Second Lieutenant Maksymilian Bartsch,*
- *section 6, Chodzież - commander: Lieutenant Włodzimierz Kowalski*
- *section 7, Czarnków - commander: Second Lieutenant Michał Zenkteler.*

According to the German plans, the attack was to focus on the first four sections.

The German to Polish forces ratio was very unfavourable to the insurgents, it was three German soldiers per one insurgent. There was also a large disproportion in firearms and artillery equipment. The situation improved on 21 January, when the Northern Front was reinforced with a company of heavy machine guns (commander: Second Lieutenant Józef Trawiński) and an artillery unit (?) (commander: Second Lieutenant Edmund Zagrodzki). Furthermore, the insurgents had some time to perform engineering work to secure the defence and strengthen the protection

of the crossings in Antoniewo and Dębionek. The commanders did not know the exact directions in which the German army would strike, the insurgents were therefore prepared for mobile defence, focusing on organising strong reserves.

The Polish side finally decided to take the initiative and occupied a number of field points and towns, which would make it difficult for the Germans to extend the attack. According to this plan, on 22 January, Captain Jan Tomaszewski and Second Lieutenant P. Cymś occupied Brzoza – however, they were forced to retreat soon afterwards as a result of a counterattack carried out by a Grenschutz unit, which, according to the German plans, was the first strike group in the operation. Having occupied Brzoza, the same group marched towards Antoniewo. The attack carried out by Captain Just's battalion, accompanied by artillery fire, was initially successful, and the company from Barcin, which defended the section, abandoned its positions in panic. The Grenschutz unit, preparing itself to attack Nowa Wieś, was stopped by Feliks Dziennik's machine-gun fire and by cannon fire shot by Second-Lieutenant Tadeusz Fabian's company which had so far been in reserve.

On 23 January, the Germans crossed the Noteć River in the vicinity of Ruda, but were pushed back. From that moment on, the fighting on the entire front section from Kcynia to Łabiszyn turned into a series of local clashes fought by the insurgents, with changing fortunes. Between 28 and 30 January the Germans finally managed to launch all four groups and heavy fighting took place near Nowa Wieś.

On 1 February, the Germans managed to cross the Noteć River once again and occupy Szubin, Rynarzewo and Łachowo. In this situation, the decision was made to counter-attack Rynarzewo with three companies:

- a company commanded by Second Lieutenant Tadeusz Fabian: along the Szubin - Rynarzewo road,

- a company commanded by Second Lieutenant Władysław Wlekliński and Master Corporal Wincenty Pluciński: along the Rudy-Florentynowo-Rynarzewo line,

- a company commanded by Second Lieutenant Józef Dratwiński: heading towards Dębionek.

Battles for Rynarzewo took place on 2 and 3 February; several times the town changed hands but the final victory belonged to the Polish army.

On 3 February, the insurgents successfully defended Kcynia. Not only did they manage to stop the German attack with artillery fire, but they also flanked the enemy, forcing Major von Meisel's battalion to retreat with heavy losses; the Polish army captured 6 German cannons and other weapons.

It can be concluded that that these events marked a visible weakening of the German army.

Although more battles were fought near Zamość, Antoniewo, Brzoza, Rosek, Wrzeszczyna, Romanowo and Wilkowice, they did not change much in the overall front structure. On 3 and 4 February, the Germans unexpectedly (despite prior agreements) occupied Chodzież and

Margonin. There was some fighting in the vicinity of Czarnków on 7 February, however, this did not bring any significant results.

Still on 18 February, intensive fighting was going on near Rynarzewo, where a German armoured train was captured after fierce fighting and at the cost of heavy losses.

The German offensive on the Northern Front ended in defeat. The fact that the insurgent units had become well established was once again confirmed, and the spontaneous enthusiasm (sometimes) turned into conscious heroism. The experience and front-line training of the soldiers started to become more obvious, which in combination with the awareness of a righteous fight gave a real and moral advantage over the enemy to the Poles. As a result, the most important front of the Greater Poland uprising was defended and only a few insignificant changes took place there until the signing of the armistice in Trier.

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