

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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THE BATTLES FOR ZBASZYŃ AND KOPANICA 11 - 12 January 1919

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[Only the Jarocin Company attempted to attack the city \(...\)](#)

As opposed to the battles fought on the Northern Front, which were of the utmost significance for the uprising and determined the further development of the situation, the aim of the clashes on the Western Front was to increase the territorial acquisitions of the Poles. In this context, the need for the neutralisation of the strong Zbąszyń garrison, which was supported by the local German population, was particularly important. The attempt at capturing the city,

made on 5 January, ended in failure. In this situation, in parallel to the determination of the plan of an offensive on the Northern Front, preparations for offensive action in the west were initiated. This was not an easy task, because as the operations in this direction started to expand, the insurgents had to fight in regions which were inhabited more and more numerous by the German population. On top of this, large German forces were stationed in Wolsztyn, Kargowa, Zbąszyń and Międzychód which had to be taken into account, because any fighting in these regions would not necessarily have positive results for the Poles.

On 10 January 1919, a meeting chaired by the commander of the Western Front, Second Lieutenant Kazimierz Zenkteler, was held in Grodzisk and action aimed at the seizure of Międzychód and Zbąszyń was planned. The first of these tasks never went beyond the initial phase of preparations. On the other hand, a lot of attention was devoted to the issue of the seizure of Zbąszyń. The composition of two groups which were supposed to attack the town from the east and south was established. However, even at that time, the situation was becoming more and more complex. The Germans had gained detailed information about the planned action and decided to pre-empt it and attack the eastern group using their forces concentrated in Kopanica, situated 18km away from Zbąszyń, in a southerly direction. Given the circumstances, the Poles changed their existing plan. The group which was supposed to take part in the action near the area of Zbąszyń was sent into action against the

German forces stationed in Kopanica. As a result of this, the following units were designated to take action against the garrison in Zbąszyń.

1. the Opalenica Company (about 200 people, commander: Second Lieutenant Edmund Klemczak),

2. the Jarocin Company (about 150 people, commander: Zbigniew Ostroróg-Gorzeński),

3. the Śrem Battalion (commander: Stefan Chosłowski) composed of:

- *the 1st Company (about 130 people, commander: Józef Muślewski),*

- *the Kórnik Company (about 160 people, commander: Stanisław Celichowski),*

- *a heavy machine gun section (commander: Daniel Kęszycki),*

- *a cavalry unit (20 people, commander: Witold Unrug),*

- *a sanitary section,*

- *a supply section.*

The German garrison from Zbąszyń had machine guns and artillery at its disposal and, in addition to this, it was supported by the local German population. Any other more detailed data on this subject are not available.

From the very beginning, the operation did not go according to the accepted plan, and information on this subject is inaccurate and incomplete. The

Kórnik Company was supposed to proceed with the attack at midnight and the Jarocin Company was to attack the building of the railway station from the east. Some of the forces, with an undetermined composition, were to bypass the Zbąszyń Lake and attack the city from the west. However, the Kórnik Company did not reach the ordered deployment line as it encountered strong resistance from a reinforced German garrison from Strzyżewo, along its marching route to its assigned destination. The Opalenica Company which was designated to support it during the fight, could not help despite the great determination of its soldiers. As a result of this, both Kórnik Company and Opalenica Company had to get involved in blocking the garrison from Strzyżewo and could not participate in the attack on Zbąszyń.

Only the Jarocin Company attempted to attack the city, but without support from its neighbouring units, this action ended in failure; the respective units did not even reach their starting points for the attack. The only positive event was the firing of accurate shots at the railway station and the starch factory. As a result of this, the insurgent units were concentrated in Łomnica, where a German attack was repulsed on 17 January - preventing the enemy from completely taking over the initiative in the region after the failed attempt by the Poles at taking Zbąszyń.

The battles of Zbąszyń ended in defeat, which was the result of the ineptitude of the Polish command and the shortage of professional qualifications of the mid-rank staff. The organisation of cooperation or rather its lack must be evaluated

with exceptional criticism. As a consequence of this, the ingenious operation, which was planned on such a large scale, was wasted and the German garrison in Zbąszyń was a real threat for the liberated part of Greater Poland until the end of the uprising.

As has been mentioned, the German garrison stationed in Kopanica (the reinforced infantry battalion), was to be eliminated by means of insurgent forces from Wolsztyn. These were:

- *the Wolsztyn Company (about 120 people, commander: Second Lieutenant Stanisław Tomiak),*
- *the Wielichowo Company (about 100 people, commander: Second Lieutenant Kazimierz Szcześniak),*
- *the Stęszew Company (about 120 people, commander: Second Lieutenant Paweł Szyfter),*
- *a unit from Rakoniewice (40 people, commander Żak - his first name is unknown).*

As time passed, insurgents from Chobienice, Obra and Kębłowo joined this group.

The commander of these forces was Second Lieutenant Stanisław Siuda.

On 10 January, the entire Polish grouping set off for Wolsztyn, with the initial intention of participating in the attack on Zbąszyń. Ultimately however, upon receiving news of the seizure of Siedlec by the Germans, the route of the further march was changed and preparations were

started to attack Kopanica. The town was taken in the morning on 11 January, in a concentric attack from the north (Stęszew and Wielichowo companies), from the east (Wolsztyn company) and from the south (the insurgents from Rakoniewice, Obra and Kębłowo). The excellent synchronisation of the respective activities and the simultaneous attack of all these units contributed to the success. Unfortunately, this was not enough to block the town from the west and the Kopanica garrison withdrew to the region of Kargowa. In contrast to the fighting for Zbąszyń where there were about one hundred fallen and wounded insurgents altogether, the losses near Kopanica were almost insignificant: Just 1 killed and a few wounded insurgents. Also quite a lot of the German armaments and equipment was captured.

The seizure of Kopanica confirmed the possibility of accomplishing success under the conditions of good cooperation and synchronisation of activities - as was the case with the battles for Łabiszyn. In the day order of Central Command of 13 January 1919, this success gained the highest recognition of the military leaders of the uprising. At the same time, Command set the ultimate borderline for insurgent operations in the western direction along the Zbąszyń lakes and Obra River.

However, it must also be concluded that during the fighting for Zbąszyń and Kopanica, the Polish command acted chaotically, in a manner which proved their inability to cooperate and synchronise the respective stages. The reconnaissance of the enemy was poor as opposed to the Germans who were kept informed

on the plans and activities of the Poles on a current basis. During the entire operation, K. Zenkteler did not control the situation. The deficiencies in command were, just like before, compensated by the heroism of rank-and-file soldiers and the determination of lower-rank commanders.

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