

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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THE BATTLES FOR CHODZIEŻ 8 February 1919

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Select Pages

[The battles for Chodzież and Szubin were directly connected \(...\)](#)

[The Czarnków unit commenced the battle \(...\)](#)

The battles for Chodzież and Szubin were directly connected to the confusion among the Germans which was caused by the occupation of Nakło by insurgents. That town, as has already been mentioned, was the main communication node in this region for the German units retreating to the west. On top of this, Nakło was a convenient base for raids on Ślesin and Bydgoszcz, Wysoka, Piła and Łobżenica. This offered real chances for the further development of the uprising in the direction of Pomerania.

Diplomatic negotiations aimed at persuading the Poles to leave Nakło were combined with

concrete military activities undertaken by the Germans. From the east, they could boast certain accomplishments: Szubin had been recovered and maintained, and Łabiszyn and Żnin were occupied. This presented a real opportunity to cut off the Polish wedge directed towards Nakło. Thus a lot depended on the outcome of the fighting along the Western frontline section - in the vicinity of Chodzież and Margonin. As early as on 7 January 1919, the Germans tried to conduct a direct attack on Nakło; although they were able to defeat the insurgents near Wysoka and Mrocza, the Polish defence in Ślesin was not broken.

Chodzież was occupied by insurgents (by virtue of an agreement) on 6 January 1919. A garrison, which consisted of 250 soldiers and was commanded by Second Lieutenant Włodzimierz Kowalski, entered the city. It comprised the Wągrowiec unit (about 40 people) and a People's Guard unit organised temporarily on the spot (about 200 soldiers).

The Germans, despite the agreement, organised an expedition from Piła to recapture Chodzież. The insurgents could not stand the pressure and withdrew from Chodzież to Budzyń. From then on, the town became a region of concentration of Polish forces which were to be used in action aimed at the recovery of Chodzież. On 7 January, the following insurgent units were gathered there:

- *Wągrowiec unit (commander: Antoni Biskupski)*
about 100 people

- from Rogoźno (commander: Seweryn Skrzetuski) about 140 people

- from Czarnków (commander: Zygmunt Łakiński) about 100 people

- from Margonin (commander: Franciszek Kryza), and also

- reinforcements from Wągrowiec and a volunteer unit from Budzyń about 50 soldiers.

Armaments (excluding personal weapons): 8 heavy machine guns and one light machine gun.

Presumably on 8 January in the morning, in Budzyń, there were already 800 insurgents. They were led by Second Lieutenant Włodzimierz Kowalski. In Chodzież, three infantry companies and a unit of German dragoons were deployed - in total about 800 soldiers and a few dozen settlers. Furthermore, the Germans manned the Rataje property, the railway station in Chodzież and a forest lodge near the village of Podanin.

The author of the plan and the final commander of the action in Chodzież is unknown. It may be supposed that Second Lieutenant Włodzimierz Kowalski, the commander of the Wągrowiec unit, and Zdzisław Ostrowski, the commandant of Military District IV since 7 January 1919, tried to implement their individual intentions in parallel.

Chodzież was to be attacked from three directions:

- the Wągrowiec unit (commander: Second Lieutenant W. Kowalski) - south of Podanin and

on towards Chodzież,

- the Oborniki unit (commander: S. Skrzetuski) - operating from the east towards the Rataje property and on towards Chodzież,

- the Rogoźno and Czarnków units (commanders: A. Biskupski and Z. Łakiński) - attack on Chodzież from the west, in the direction of the railway station.

The idea was that these attacks were supposed to be started at the same time on 8 January 1919, at 8.00 a.m. However, in reality, there was no synchronisation and the respective insurgent units often fought on their own with varying results, especially if it is taken into account that there were no arrangements regarding communication between the respective groups.

The Czarnków unit commenced the battle one hour ahead of schedule. The attack was repulsed and its participants, having received news that Czarnków was endangered by the Germans, returned to their homes. As a result of this, the attack of the Wągrowiec and Rogoźno units was repulsed with heavy losses. The insurgents were defeated and dispersed, and some of them resigned from further fighting and returned home. On the other hand, the insurgents from Oborniki and the group led by Franciszek Kryza which joined them were successful. They managed to enter Chodzież from the east and together with some Rogoźno soldiers, who had held their positions, they carried out a concentric attack, seized the railway station and forced its crew to escape in the direction of Piła by train.

At the same time, it was possible to gather some of the dispersed Września unit and move into attack in the direction of Chodzież again. This time the task was successful. On 8 January, approximately at noon, the town was free.

The next turn of events was not such a great success, as the planned attack on Piła (as a consequence of the defeat near Szubin on 8 January) had to be cancelled. Three sluices were closed between Czarnków and Wieleń which resulted in the flooding of the Noteć valley along this section. The necessity to concentrate the forces necessary to stop the German forces near Szubin forced Central Command to issue the order to leave Chodzież.

Polish losses: 24 dead and 62 wounded insurgents. There were 72 fallen on the German side during the fighting for the city and about 70 other soldiers died as a result of shots fired by insurgents at a train that was leaving Piła. Polish acquisitions: 12 heavy machine guns and 13 light machine guns, 2 mine launchers (mortars), several horses and carts with ammunition.

Let us try to sum up the period of fighting between 27 December 1918 and 8 January 1919. Analysis of the course of the battles for Chodzież allows for the drawing of conclusions which had already been revealed from considerations regarding other battles during the first ten days of the Greater Poland uprising. Above all, it was almost a general rule that the commanders of the respective units had no suitable qualifications. Though they were full of good will, good intention and patriotic zeal, they did not cope well with the

professional manoeuvres during the battles and committed mistakes which were uncommon among educated officers with experience on the front. Some of the errors committed were gross even under the conditions present at that time. The lack of arrangements regarding measures and means of communication as well as the lack of synchronisation of the operations of the respective groups could be observed particularly often. The general concept, i.e. attacking towns from several directions at the same time was correct, but the way it was implemented left a lot to be desired.

Sufficient information about the enemy was very rarely available to the insurgents during battles; the battles for Chodzież were one positive exception in this respect. When the attack took place, action was taken without taking into account previous arrangements, mistakes were committed in the system of command: lack of communication, imprecise arrangements regarding the chain of command, the personal participation of commanders in combat, thus, a lack of control of the entire situation, etc. Cases of conflicts regarding the chain of command happened quite rarely, but there was no commander with real, established charisma, talent or authentic tactical expertise. As usual in such cases, self-proclaimed commanders as well as commanders willing to show bravado and take risks like e.g. P. Cymy or W. Kowalski had too much to say. However, when there was a need to manage the operations under difficult conditions which required experience and often also instinct - as was the case e.g. during the street fighting in

Inowrocław or Chodzież - they were helpless. Ordinary insurgents would often pay with their lives for this lack of skills in their commanders. Only one commander, Władysław Wiewiórowski, suffered the tragic consequences of his lack of imagination. In such cases, the German policy of preventing Poles from taking higher officer posts in the army, which had been systematically implemented for many years, finally took its toll. As a consequence of this, units commanded by an officer with a rank higher than second lieutenant were rarely their opponents. Additionally, there was a scarcity of commanders, among the insurgents, with a true innate talent for command. Officers and non-commissioned officers who were full of enthusiasm and good intention prevailed, however, they were not experienced and also not theoretically prepared to manage bigger units in different conditions. In the case of the first battle of Szubin, one could have a number of reservations regarding the actions taken by Lieutenant Colonel Kazimierz Grudzielski himself, who was responsible for all the insurgent operations on the Northern Front under his control. He committed unforgivable mistakes: he did not take personal command of this action (though he should have, based on the situation that was developing at that time), he did not draw up a central plan of action, he did not control the course of events, and last but not least, he did not organise reserves beforehand, which could have been used in the event of failure to seize Szubin. As a consequence of this, after repulsing the insurgent attack, the enemy struck again and, facing no further resistance, occupied Łabiszyn and Żnin and exposed the right flank of

the wedge directed towards Nakło. The Poles owed the lack of any enemy counter-offensive and any possible march of the Germans to the south and west only to the weakness of the German forces in Bydgoszcz.

In this context, it is necessary to appreciate the qualifications of German officers, more often than not they were experienced frontline soldiers who were able to effectively defend the respective structures and towns while commanding soldiers whose morale was much lower than that of the insurgents. When this regular army defended its positions (the 6th Grenadier Regiment in Poznań and the 140th Infantry Regiment in Inowrocław), an insurgent attack would, as a rule, end in failure. The lack of qualifications to command was compensated by Poles with patriotic zeal, determination and courage verging on devotion, as well as the general, often enthusiastic support of the population.

The German activities during the first ten days of the uprising were characterised by indecisiveness and disorientation, which was conducive to the taking of decisions which were not necessarily always consistent. The main centre of the possible German counter-action was Bydgoszcz, while the seizure of Nakło by Polish units made the Germans consider more decisive action. The Northern Front was the axis of major events at that time - also the fiercest battles were taking place there and the losses were the heaviest.

The activity of insurgent formations was not always compliant with the political plans of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council.

The ordinary insurgents and lower rank commanders did not understand the difficult situation of the region which could not afford the creation of *fait accompli* before the signing of the peace treaty. Therefore, conflicts would often burst out between politicians and representatives of the soldiers fighting on the frontline.

On the other hand, Central Command had developed organisational activities from the very beginning and had proceeded with operational planning. Reflections of these phenomena were the preparation of the plan for the seizure of the Air Base in Ławica on 6 January 1919 and also the regrouping and concentration of insurgent units to repulse the threat caused by the seizure of Łabiszyn and Żnin by the Germans. It was also important (even at that time) to take organisational steps aimed at the transformation of volunteer units into a regular army. Previously, the insurgents had made their participation in the fighting dependent on their good will, they would also subordinate themselves only to those commanders whom they accepted and considered their possible return home at any time to be natural. As the Germans began to exert stronger pressure on the front of the uprising and proceeded with offensive operations, the entire armed effort of the Greater Poland residents could only be saved if a strong, well organised, equipped and commanded regular army was formed. This was the course taken by the political and military authorities of the region.

The second part of the spontaneous period of the Greater Poland uprising took place after 10 January 1919. This was the time when the signs of

much better organisation of the activities against the Germans appeared.

Select Pages

1

2

