

# Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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## THE INSURGENT RAID OF PAWEŁ CYMS 1 - 6 January 1919

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[As the plans to capture Bydgoszcz were abandoned \(...\)](#)

[Group II. Commander \(...\)](#)

[To make matters worse \(...\)](#)

As the plans to capture Bydgoszcz were abandoned, the decision was taken to expand the uprising in the direction of Inowrocław.

Presumably, the author of this plan was W.

Jedlina - Jacobson. Finally, however, a unit which consisted of 100 people, mainly insurgents from Gniezno and Września left Gniezno on 1 January 1919 under the command of Second Lieutenant Paweł Cymś. On that very same day, the unit occupied Trzemeszno. Here, a small unit of local volunteers commanded by Władysław Wlekiński (about 50 people) joined Cymś. At the same time,

changes in the organisation of the command were introduced. Cyms maintained command of all the combined forces, and Mieczysław Słabęcki became the commander of the Gniezno-Września Company.

Then, this small corps set off for Mogilno. The town had previously been liberated, therefore, it would welcome the unit commanded by Cyms as a Polish town. From there, the Gniezno-Września company was sent to Strzelno, where, with the support of the local population, it fought a victorious battle against the Germans who were stationed there. Soon, on 2 January, the main forces of Cyms entered Strzelno and were reinforced with volunteers arriving from surrounding areas. By order of the commander of the regrouping, the expedition was joined by a unit formed in Mogilno and commanded by Stanisław Roloff.

In the night of 2 to 3 January 1919 Kruszwica liberated itself through its own means and resources. On the way to this town, the encountered German units were disarmed and the town of Wronowy was liberated. Thus, this area was cleared of armed Germans and on 5 January all local insurgent units were concentrated in Kruszwica without any obstacles. Next day, a unit from Miłosław (commander: Stanisław Pluciński) and the 1st Battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment from Włocławek in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland, commanded by Captain Michał Zabdyr, arrived in the following composition: two infantry companies, one heavy machine gun platoon (3 pieces), a communication team and a sanitary patrol - in total 370 people.

The appearance of these soldiers from the border cordon was an exceptional event and could cause political consequences which would threaten the development of armed activities in the "German" part of Greater Poland. In bringing these soldiers, Captain Zebdyr acted on his own, out of the patriotic impulse of his heart, disregarding the consequences which could unfold as a result of his patriotic gesture. Obviously the insurgents in Inowrocław did not have anything against the presence of two companies of a regular army acting in their favour.

In the meantime, in Strzelno, P. Cymś received an order regarding the immediate cessation of any activities, issued by the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. As a result of this, the Polish commanders were at a loss. In Mątwy, even during the march for Inowrocław, a meeting was held between Cymś and a representative of the Supreme People's Council - Feliks Koszutski. The intention was to stop the march of Cymś's units, thus implementing the results of the negotiations with the Germans. The sentiments among the insurgents and the news of the German repression of Poles after the failed attempt at taking control of the city on 4 January prevailed. The decision was taken to fight for Inowrocław.

The insurgent march of the group commanded by Paweł Cymś to Inowrocław went down in the history of the Greater Poland uprising. On 1 January 1919, the expedition from Gniezno reached Mogilno, marching along the route between Jankowo Dolne, Łukowo, Trzemeszno and Wydartowo. Next day the insurgents left

Mogilno and arrived in Kruszwica, passing such towns as Bystrzyca, Jeziorki, Strzelno, Młyny, Wronowy, Stodolno and Stawsko Wielkie. After three days, on 5 January, the route was continued and the insurgents left for Inowrocław, marching through Mątwy.

The German 140th Infantry Regiment, of unknown size, was stationed in that city (commander: Major Grollmann). It was fully ready to repulse the Polish attack – especially after a German officer sent to start negotiations was detained by Cyms.

Second Lieutenant Paweł Cyms commanded 900 soldiers concentrated in Matwy; their armament was not uniform and the soldiers hardly had 20 bullets per gun. The plan was to seize the railway station (in order to cut off any way of retreat for the German staff and deliver reinforcements from Bydgoszcz), to surround and take control of the barracks of the 140th Infantry Regiment, and then occupy the entire city. The reconnaissance of the German forces was very poor. Furthermore, the action aimed at seizing Inowrocław was neither compliant with the decisions and instructions of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council nor the provisions of the armistice signed in the city just one day before, when an attempt at taking control of the city by forces of local insurgents had failed. As a matter of fact, the only advantage of the planned action was the decisiveness and determination of the Polish soldiers.

The plan for the seizure of Inowrocław was agreed upon in Mątwy. For the purpose of its

implementation, P. Cymś divided his forces into two strike groups.

Group I. Commander: Captain Michał Zabdyr.

*Composition:*

*- the 1st Company of the 31 Infantry Regiment  
about 120 people*

*- the Witkowo unit (commander: Stanisław  
Połczyński) about 50 people*

*- the Miłosław unit (commander: Stanisław  
Pluciński) about 30 people*

*- the Kruszwica company (commander Ignacy  
Nowak) about 120 people*

*- the Strzelno company (commander Stefan  
Różnowicz) about 100 people*

*(this last company joined the other units in  
Inowrocław)*

*In total: about 420 soldiers.*

Armaments: rifles, double-barrelled shotguns, 2 heavy machine guns.

Task: to enter Inowrocław from the south, via Poznańska Street and Szymborska Street, occupy the artillery barracks on the eastern outskirts of the city, take control of the city centre and continue the attack towards the infantry barracks. Furthermore, it would be necessary to cross the railway line running to Toruń.

Group II. Commander: Second Lieutenant Paweł Cymś.

*Composition:*

- the 2nd Company of the 31 Infantry Regiment about 120 people*
- the Gniezno-Września Company (commander: Mieczysław Słabęcki) about 90 people*
- the Trzemeszno unit (commander: Władysław Wlekliński) about 50 people*
- the Młyny unit (commander: Józef Owczarski) about 90 people*
- the Mogilno unit (commander: Stanisław Roloff) about 50 people*

*In total: about 400 soldiers*

Armaments: rifles - 3 heavy and 3 light machine guns.

Task: to concentrate in the area of the salt works (west of the city), to attack and seize the railway station and then – together with 300 people mobilised in Mogilno under the command of Izydor Włodarek, and the Barcin unit of Aleksander Jakubowski – attack the barracks of the 140th Infantry Regiment.

The cavalry unit (commander: Stanisław Chełmicki) was sent to Jaksice, with the task of destroying the railway tracks between Jaksice and Złotniki Kujawskie.

The commander of the operation was Second Lieutenant Paweł Cymś.

The Polish groups set off from Mątwy on 5

January 1919 at 4.00 a.m. Captain Zabdyr's Group was to step in at 7.00 a.m., and the group commanded by Second Lieutenant Cymś - one hour later.

The first group, in accordance with the described plan, quickly took control of the downtown area and approached the barracks of the 140th Infantry Regiment. Along the way, a battle for the post office building was fought. An attempt was made to attack the barracks from the side of the Dworcowa Street and the Evangelical and Jewish cemeteries - however the strong German gunfire stopped the insurgents.

The attack of the second group was only partially successful. Although the railway station was seized, the Germans managed to recapture the building in an effective counter-attack and then took some of the people from the Młyny and Gniezno units into captivity. Ultimately, the railway station was not recovered.

German reinforcements from Bydgoszcz did not arrive in Inowrocław as a rebellion of the soldiers of Polish nationality who served in the garrison broke out. Furthermore, the reinforcements sent in the morning on 6 January were withdrawn in accordance with the wish of the commander of the 140th Infantry Regiment, Major Grollmann, who had already started negotiations with the insurgents. One way or another, helping the German garrison in Inowrocław would not be easy, as the small unit of Polish cavalry sent with the task of breaking the railway tracks between Żłotniki and Jaksice had succeeded in their task.

Around noon, the fighting in the city stopped; the railway station and the barracks of the 140th Infantry Regiment were still in German hands. More small insurgent units, consisting of 500 people in total, arrived from Mogilno, Barcin and Pakość. One of the companies of the 31st Infantry Regiment still remained in reserve. As a result of this, both the railway station and the barracks were blocked by more and more insurgent units and deprived of the possibility of receiving help from outside. Counter-attacks coming out of the barracks ended in failure.

Initially, civil activists, behind the backs of insurgent commanders, signed an initial agreement with the Germans which divided the city into the eastern Polish part and the western German part (including the railway station and the barracks). Captain Zabdyr accepted the agreement and only at about 4.00 p.m. Second Lieutenant Cyms, who had already recovered, annulled these arrangements. In the night of 5 to 6 January 1919, a formal ceasefire which also provided for the departure of Germans with weapons in their hands from the city, was formally confirmed. On 6 January 1919, at 10.00 p.m. Inowrocław was liberated.

Losses: in the case of the insurgents - 47 soldiers and 6 civilians dead, 120 people wounded. In the case of the Germans: 14 dead. Polish acquisitions: several machine guns, 1550 guns, 4 cars, 3000 uniform kits and a large amount of ammunition and hand grenades.

As a result of the battles for Inowrocław, the city was liberated, but the losses were relatively



heavy. Although the final goal of the fighting was accomplished, the initially assigned tasks were not completed. Undoubtedly, the slightly adventurous nature of the whole operation complied with the sentiments of the Polish population but did not correspond to the military reality and the political situation of the region. As a result of this, as soon as Captain Zabdyr returned to Włocławek, he had to face disciplinary sanctions regarding his arbitrary crossing of the border, and in the case of Second Lieutenant Cyms the possibility of indictment was taken into account due to his insubordination and contribution to the unnecessary, or at least excessive bloodshed.

The liberation of Inowrocław must be treated as a part of bigger operation aimed at the liberation of the Kuyavia region. Paweł Cyms, just like the majority of his subordinates, did not have to be aware of the political circumstances of the activities undertaken by the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. However, he became known as the leader of an effectively conducted liberation raid and a person who enjoyed a great amount of popularity. He failed as a commander during street fighting - an action which always requires a lot of experience in combat along with the appropriate professional skills. He kept the company of the 31st Infantry Regiment in reserve unnecessarily - one of the best subunits of his small corps. Instead of directing the entire action from one place, he took over command of the strike group, losing his bearings with regards to the overall situation and losing control of the development of events. Also, his command was

quite chaotic - Second Lieutenant Cyms could not organise a chain of command, which is one of the fundamental duties of any commander, irrespective of the nature of the undertaken activities. When he himself, out of sheer exhaustion, lost consciousness during the battles for the city, some of the soldiers, remembering the exclusivity of command (absolutely unnecessary but understandable in the reality of fighting undertaken by a voluntary army), which he had ordered, refused to submit to the temporary deputy commander. Also, at times, Zabdyr and Cyms took action on their own, without taking into account previous arrangements.

To make matters worse, the arms and supplies began to fail. The weapons with which the Polish soldiers had attacked a well prepared enemy had not been uniform and additionally, they had hardly had 20 bullets per gun at their disposal. As a result of this, as the fighting for the railway station went on, at some point in time, the insurgents ran out of ammunition.

The final success of the battles for Inowrocław was determined, above all, by the determination and courage of the insurgents, as well as the unambiguously patriotic and at the same time valorous attitude of the Polish community of the city and the nearby vicinity. This also contributed to the accelerated decision of the Germans to march out of the city (initially, the date set for them was 7 January, at midnight). During the fighting, cases of arbitrary behaviour and insubordination took place though, after all, they were quite typical for insurgent units consisting,

for the most part, of volunteers. The numerical strength of the units was not proportionate to the military skills. As a result of this, the railway station seized with so much hardship was easily lost, and attempts to recapture it and to seize the barracks also failed – apparently similar phenomena to those which took place in Poznań and Zdziechowa were also present here. As a consequence of this, the losses were disproportionately high in comparison to the accomplished results.

Also, the issue of the involvement of the battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment is deeply questionable. Observation of the course of events allows for the drawing of the conclusion that P. Cymś could not use this unit properly, and the results achieved would have been the same if the soldiers of Captain Zabdyr had not been present in Inowrocław. On the other hand, the involvement of soldiers from the Congress Kingdom in battles on the other side of the still existing border, could have had exceptionally dramatic effects for the status of the Greater Poland uprising. There is no wonder then that both Poznań and Warsaw were appalled by the participation of the soldiers of the 31st Infantry Regiment in the battles for Inowrocław.

From the patriotic point of view, the raid of Paweł Cymś and the fighting for the capital city of Kuyavia must be assessed positively, however, the strictly professional conclusions will remain strict even if we take the level of the art of war during those times into consideration. The propaganda, the spectacular nature of the events in this area during the first week of January 1919 made P.

Cymś and his soldiers a subject of historical novels (W. Rogowski: *Owoc w dłonie*, Poznań 1973, G. Górnicki: *Bitwa szalała do wieczora*, Poznań 1984) and a play by Gerard Górnicki: *Poszli ci, którzy powinni* (Poznań 1978). However, here, non-scientific reasons, quite different from the strictly military ones, were the decisive factors.

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