

## Chapter IV

### November 1918 – April 1919

#### 1 – First Stage of the Organisation of the Polish Armed Forces

The creation of the Polish armed forces, in the first phase of Poland's re-existence, was a phenomenon which has no equal in contemporary military history. The world war had indeed shown examples of rapid and improvised mobilisations of millions of men in Britain and America: but these were in entirely different situations and there is no analogy between the two phenomena.

Britain and America created their armies on the basis of a long-standing structure of the state: they already had cadres with regular organisation, not very many it is true, but excellent and suited to serve as the base of a good organisation. The high economic level of the two countries, and the fact that they were not directly threatened by the enemy, gave them plenty of freedom in their organisational work.

The first elements of the Polish armed forces arose in a completely different situation.

There was no existing structure for the state, as only the very first foundations had been laid by way of organising the highest state authorities, the administrative organs and the public safety authorities. The treasury was empty, industry was ruined. Society was stressed and there was a tiredness which had impregnated the public as a result of the war; there were differences of opinion about what needed to be done in every domain; and this lack of any common ground in the interior increased the chaos and caused enormous difficulties in the construction of the state. Military cadres, in the form of regular units, were almost non-existent. War material was lacking, and one had to be content with what had been left behind by the Central Powers when their occupying troops departed.

So this was the general situation in the middle of which, at the end of 1918, the Polish Army started forming.

The internal difficulties of the state made the external difficulties daily worse. Poland did not, at that time, have defined borders: instead there were new front-lines constantly appearing. An army could not be formed in a co-ordinated and systematic manner when the immediate and pressing needs of these fronts were ever-present. The feverish haste with which diverse units were created and their premature dispatch to the combat zones were to have serious repercussions for later efforts at organisation.

It is not exaggerating to say that the first stage of organising the Polish armed forces, which started in the first days of November 1918 and which was basically to last until April 1919, was a magnificent and huge work of improvisation – all the more remarkable in that it was done with no outside help. The aid sent to us by the Allied powers, in the form of war material and technical devices, arrived later. The help of these states in organising and training the troops was to arrive later still.

This stage can be divided into two periods: the first, from November 1918 to February 1919, was characterised by the intermittent appearance of small units, quite often forming themselves autonomously, not exceeding battalions, squadrons or batteries: in the second period, these units became a sort of cadre for larger tactical units. They were fused into regiments and then commenced organising themselves into infantry divisions and cavalry brigades, following a certain amount of planning and under the direction of the central military authorities.

The creation of the Polish armed forces properly speaking dated from 11 November 1918, at the moment when Commander Piłsudski assumed the functions of commander-in-chief, but was based on the legacies of the world war. By that time there were two important assets: there was a pre-existing regular organisation and there was a reservoir of forces more or less prepared to be rapidly transformed into a regular organisation.

It was on the first of these that the Regency Council concentrated its efforts. It also determined that the regions that had been under Austro-Hungarian domination were the first to be liberated. The positive results of the Council's efforts, during the last phase of its existence, was to assume supreme authority with regard to the "Polish Armed Forces" and to transform it into the "First Brigade of the Polish Army". It also created at the end of October the first elements of the higher military organs: the Ministry of War, directed by Colonel Wroczyński, and the General Staff, commanded by General Rozwadowski. However the efforts of the Regency Council to expand the effective strength of the army by forming territorial infantry regiments and cavalry squadrons, in 15 military regions especially created for this purpose, gave such poor results that on 11 November some of the regions were not yet functioning, and in those that were active the strengths of the units organised was still very weak.

In the liberated territory the organisational work had the result of transforming some reserve units of the former Austrian army into cadres for Polish units. A start had been made on reconstituting the former Legion<sup>1</sup> regiments and on

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<sup>1</sup> Austria had raised quite a large body of ethnic Poles into a Polish "Legion", commanded by Piłsudski. Towards the end of the war these units were forced to make a new oath, and on their refusal to do so many refused and were disbanded, Piłsudski being jailed. Nonetheless, his men attempted to retain their structure as much as possible and were later to form the basis of the "Legion" regiments of the new Polish Army.



mobilising the “Polish Military Organisation”<sup>1</sup>. This gave by 11 November a certain number of regular units, albeit small units, of not more than battalion size.

These forces really could only be considered as cadres, more or less organised, prepared to accept new human material with some difficulty. As at 11 November this core for the eventual reconstruction of the army numbered 24 infantry battalions, 3 cavalry squadrons and 5 artillery batteries.

The personnel situation was much better. The first line was the Legionaries, officers and troopers, and the “Polish Military Organisation”. Soldiers from the former Eastern Corps<sup>2</sup> formed an important element. As for the Poles of the former conquering armies, only the officers could be counted on to join: the rankers, tired after their long service in foreign armies, above all wanted to return as quickly as possible to conditions of peace.

The first problem that the organisers of the Polish armed forces faced at that critical moment, was to decide on which base to form the forces – recruitment or voluntary engagement. The second was chosen.

There were two essential considerations acting against moving straight to conscription. Firstly there was a complete lack of general administrative bodies and more specifically those needed for mobilisation. And also the “years” that would be recruited had already been enlisted by Austria and, to a certain extent, Russia. A call-up would have brought to the national army a mass of men worn out by a long war, who were demoralised by the disorganisation that they had witnessed while serving time in a foreign army, or men who had not yet served but who, despite that, were morally fatigued by the war. The result would have been catastrophic for the morale of the new army and its fighting power, all the more so since the new conditions of service were to be extremely hard as a result of the lack of material, mostly in arms and equipment. At that time the essential element for the creation of a suitable spirit in the army was the good will of the bulk of the soldiers, and only volunteers would provide that.

General Regions were created as territorial bases for the organisational work: Warsaw, Łódź, Lublin, Kielce and Kraków. These General Regions were made up of many so-called Military Regions. The territory of the former Congress Kingdom was divided into 15 Military Regions, that of former Galicia into two: there was also General Rozwadowski’s operational group region, made up of eastern Little Poland to the east of the Wisłok<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time the development of the central authorities proceeded. The Ministry for Military Affairs was given to Colonel Wroczynski, soon to be replaced by General Lesniewski. General Szeptycki was given the command of the General Staff, succeeding General Rozwadowski, who had been given a command at the front. The actual direction of the organisational work was centralised a little later, and for quite some time the Commanders of the General Regions played the principal roles.

The various General Regions proceeded to form infantry and cavalry regiments. Thus in the Warsaw Region, 14 infantry and 4 cavalry regiments were formed, while in the Łódź Region, it was 4 infantry and 2 cavalry regiments. The Kielce Region gave birth to 4 infantry and 2 cavalry regiments, the Lublin Region, 3 infantry and 2 cavalry regiments and the Kraków Region 11 infantry and 4 cavalry regiments. The organisation of the artillery was concentrated on Warsaw and Kraków, where the occupying troops had left behind large stocks of material and ammunition.

The decision to proceed at that time with voluntary engagement was to prove wise. The flow of men enlisting responded to the existing positions, defined by the material resources. The POW was spread through the army’s ranks, having waited a long time for this moment; the Legion units, spread over the country, regrouped. The Polish cadres of the former Austrian army grew. The organisational centres of the former Eastern Corps and Russian Army were re-established. The youth in the schools, up until then without organisation, and the young workers and peasants responded in large numbers to the appeal for volunteers.

In the middle of January 1919, the strength of the Polish forces had already risen to about 110,000 men. There were more than 100 infantry batteries, some 70 cavalry squadrons and 80 batteries. Besides these there were some technical units and some aviation squadrons.

Naturally the organisation of these units was far from perfect. They had no tables of organisation: the composition was so variable that the number of constituent companies differed arbitrarily from one battalion to another. Their training and rules lacked uniformity. Armament was varied and provisioning, principally in equipment, was insufficient.

The process of this rapid organisation was entirely under the influence of the continually increasing demands from the front. The struggles for L’viv, for the Cieszyn-Silesia area and for Volhynia and the need to enter action against the approaching Russian invasion, forced units to leave the interior for the front before obtaining the minimum required levels of preparation. Isolated battalions, even companies, were thrown from the interior to protect menaced locations, thereby breaking any organisational links.

The conditions prevented any possibility of co-ordinated work in the interior. It was no better at the combat fronts: the

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<sup>1</sup> Generally known by its Polish initials as the POW. This was an underground army set up in Poland, waiting for a chance to rise up. Because the men had not received any training it was of less military value than the Legions, but was extremely patriotic.

<sup>2</sup> I believe here he means the German Forces on the Russian Front at 1918.

<sup>3</sup> The far southeastern corner of modern Poland, round Sanok and Przemyśl.



battalions, squadrons and batteries which made up the highest level units were assembled into operational groups and sub-groups on the basis of immediate circumstances.

Eventually the time came as the interior conditions of the country became relatively stable – in particular with the establishment of an administrative apparatus – when a sensible development of the forces had to be considered, taking into account the inconvenience of continuing to organise the troops on the previous basis, both from general principles of organisation and the need to assure that the army became a tool which could undertake decisive operations. Also, the High Command had decided to form grand tactical units based on a system of conscription. The aid coming from the Allies, in the form of combat material and provisions, favoured this measure.

The organisational plan established foresaw the creation of 12 infantry divisions and 6 cavalry brigades. Each infantry division would progressively be given an artillery brigade, two cavalry squadrons, technical units with corresponding auxiliaries and depots.

The creation of the divisions in February 1919 took place, in principle, in two ways. The difference being whether the organisational centre of a given division was in the interior or at the front-line. In the first case, it was important at an opportune time to retire the affected units from the front to the rear, to organise them there, fill in the gaps and merge everyone properly into the mother unit. In the second case, it was first necessary to move all the particular units destined for the division into a single sector, units which had previously operated in isolation and were spread all over the front, or even at different fronts. Then they needed to be progressively fused into bigger and bigger units, and then include in units formed in the interior. At a quick pace from 21 February the following infantry divisions were formed: the 1<sup>st</sup> Legion and 2<sup>nd</sup> Legion, with principle centres in the interior; 3<sup>rd</sup> Legion, a L'vov division; and the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry, with its principle centre on the eastern Little Poland front. Reorganisation was also started on the former Lithuanian-Belorussian<sup>1</sup> Division, thrown into the front against Russia in the Vawkavysk region.

About this time a redistribution of the responsibilities of the central authorities was commenced. The Ministry of Military Affairs had the interior troops under its orders. The minister, General Lesniewski, was assisted by two vice-ministers: General Majewski and General Sosnkowski. It was the latter who was largely responsible for the work of organisation, as such. The General Staff, after passing on a portion of its personnel to the Ministry became from then on properly speaking the staff of the High Command. It was by its intermediary that the latter had the possibility of exercising a more precise influence than previously over the operations on the diverse fronts. The introduction at the General Staff of a post of Quartermaster helped ensure the better satisfaction of material needs for the units at the front. General Stanisław Haller was placed at the head of the reorganised General Staff, succeeding General Szeptycki who had been named commander of an operational group.

From 19 January there was a partial call-up of the 1898 class of recruits and, on 7 March, the Constitutional Diet voted to call up six classes (1896–1901).

At the start of March, the Polish Army already had 170,000 men and by 1 April there were more than 80,000 men at the front-lines.

There was also the expected arrival from France of the army named after General Josif Haller.<sup>2</sup>

Up until then all the armed forces created by the Polish government had been in the former Kingdom and Little Poland. Nevertheless there was an organisational centre in Great Poland where a distinct army had been created independent of the Warsaw government, under the orders of General Dowbor-Musnicki – the Army of Great Poland.

The birth of the Army of Great Poland dated from a rising in that province in the last days of December 1918. It was created from soldiers of the former German Army and had a large component of officers from the former Eastern Corps. The considerable stocks of material left by the Germans made this task easier. This army too was formed under combat conditions, against the Germans in its case. Despite that the circumstances were much more favourable to it: in a relatively short time it reached a total of three infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade, about 60,000 men in total.

## 2 – The Struggle in Little Poland and Volhynia<sup>3</sup>

The war initially covered the south-eastern region of current<sup>4</sup> Poland.

It has been noted above that the November revolution had not only signalled the liberation of Polish land in eastern Little Poland from Austrian domination but had also coincided with a Ukrainian revolt.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although titled the “Lithuanian-Belorussian Division” the men were Poles, though many came from places inside Lithuania and Belorussia. There were no ethnic Lithuanians or Belorussians in the unit.

<sup>2</sup> Haller led a large and experienced army composed mostly of ethnic Poles (though not all from Poland by any stretch) which had fought on the Western Front. It was well equipped by the French and hence is often called the “Blue Army” after its French-style “horizon” blue uniforms.

<sup>3</sup> See the section in the introduction on place names, especially for a discussion on “Little Poland” and its use by Przybylski.

<sup>4</sup> He means the Polish borders as they stood 1920–1939. The current border is considerably further west.

<sup>5</sup> See notes in the introduction about the validity of the term “revolt” in this context.



This revolt had been prepared long before, in favourable circumstances and with the support of the Austrian authorities,<sup>6</sup> and was executed rapidly and without difficulty. During the night of 31 October/1 November, the Ukrainians seized L'viv and then occupied all of eastern Little Poland up to the San in the west. As part of spreading their domination of the country, they proclaimed the “Western Ukrainian People’s Republic”.<sup>7</sup> This proclamation was the work of the Ukrainian National Council which had existed from the middle of October and which acted as provisional government.

The armed forces which were both the base and the tool of the revolt were made up of reserve units of the Austrian Army, mostly formed of Ukrainians. These units, after having been definitively purged of the non-Ukrainian elements and after the spontaneous demobilisation of men refusing to serve any longer, made up – along with the former Austrian Ruthenian<sup>3</sup> Legions (called Ukrainian Cossack Rifles)<sup>4</sup> – the organisational base of a rapidly improvised army for the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic. Their first material needs were satisfied by way of taking arms, munitions, equipment and funds from Austrian reserve units. Later arms and munitions were imported from Hungary and Czechoslovakia in exchange for petrol.<sup>5</sup> The Dnieper Ukraine also furnished some material aid. A serious difficulty hindering the formation of the army was the lack of officers. This explains why many command posts in Ukrainian units were occupied by Germans. The army recruited initially by voluntary engagement but soon returned to conscription. At the highest point of its development, the end of March 1919, the Western Ukrainian Army had about 40,000 men in three corps, each consisting of many infantry brigades with artillery and technical units. Supreme command was exercised by General Omeljanowicz-Pawlenko then, towards the end of the campaign, but General Grekow. Administrative and organisational questions were given to General Witowski.

The Ukrainian revolt in eastern Little Poland was in general a complete surprise to the Poles. It was only in L'viv that any warning was given and then not enough time to allow it to be fended off. But once the revolt was declared on 1 November, the Polish population of L'viv spontaneously started to vigorously defend itself within a few hours.

The centre of the self-defence was the Polish Military Organisation [POW] plus a small amount of men from the Polish Auxiliary Corps [PKP]. To these were added the Legionaries living in the town and the Polish officers of the former Austrian Army, organised into Polish Military Cadres [PKW]. But as soon as the word was given for the fight, the ranks of the defenders of “Polonism” in L'viv were reinforced on an hourly basis: the population of the town taking up arms spontaneously, often taking them directly from the enemy. Among the combatants there were many young people, children, and even women.

The fighting was initially confused but progressively moved to certain quarters: Captain Maczynski took overall command, with Lieutenant Lapinski as his assistant. Within a few days the Poles had recaptured a large part of the city and L'viv was divided into two by a front line: the east in Ukrainian hands and the west in Polish ones. Bitter street fighting took place for three weeks. They fought over isolated houses and the important points in the town. Despite the hard conditions endured, nearly every day saw success for the brave defenders and the growth of the Polish-held portion.

While this went on, the Ukrainian insurrection had won over the regions to the north, south and west of L'viv and, after the occupation of Przemyśl, reached up to the San. The weak handful of L'viv’s defenders found themselves entirely cut off from the interior. Liaison was maintained entirely by emissaries squeezing through the regions in revolt and by aviators. It was by means of these that L'viv sent its appeals for help to Kraków, and then to Warsaw.

On the news of the occupation of L'viv by the Ukrainians and the valorous defence, the first region to respond was eastern Little Poland, the first area freed of the invader’s yoke. Starting on 11 November a detachment formed in extreme haste in Kraków, under the command of Major Stachiewicz, delivered Przemyśl and thereby created a base for later operations, with the immediate aim of helping L'viv. The organisation of sending help was undertaken by Colonel Tokarzewski, sent to Przemyśl by General Roja. On 13 November he received, by an aviator from recently liberated Warsaw, an order from the commander-in-chief telling him to free L'viv as soon as possible. General Roja, commander of the Kraków General Region, was to prepare the necessary forces for this operation.

The central Poland did not remain indifferent either to the appeal from L'viv: the proof being the constitution in Lublin of a detachment under the orders of Major Wiczorkiewicz charged with delivering L'viv and a similar one in Warsaw under the command of Colonel Skryznski.

The expedition left Przemyśl on 19 November. So as to not lose precious time its commander, Colonel Tokarzewski,

<sup>6</sup> This is not true. The Austrians did very little to actively stop the Ukrainian takeover, but did not support it in any way.

<sup>7</sup> Often known by the initials ZUNR (*Zakhidno Ukrainiska Narodna Republika*) or, more commonly still, merely as “Galicia”, which is basically the area they claimed e.g. their army was the UGA (Ukrainian Galician Army) or by the Ukrainian initials as the UHA (*Ukrainska Halytska Armiia*).

<sup>3</sup> A term sometimes used for Galician Ukrainians, especially those living in the Austro-Hungarian empire.

<sup>4</sup> These are what the Ukrainians called the *Legion Ukrainskikh Sichovykh Striltsev* commonly known as the “Sich” Rifles. They were an entirely Ukrainian formation inside the Austrian Army. Privates were termed “*kozak*” i.e. Cossack.

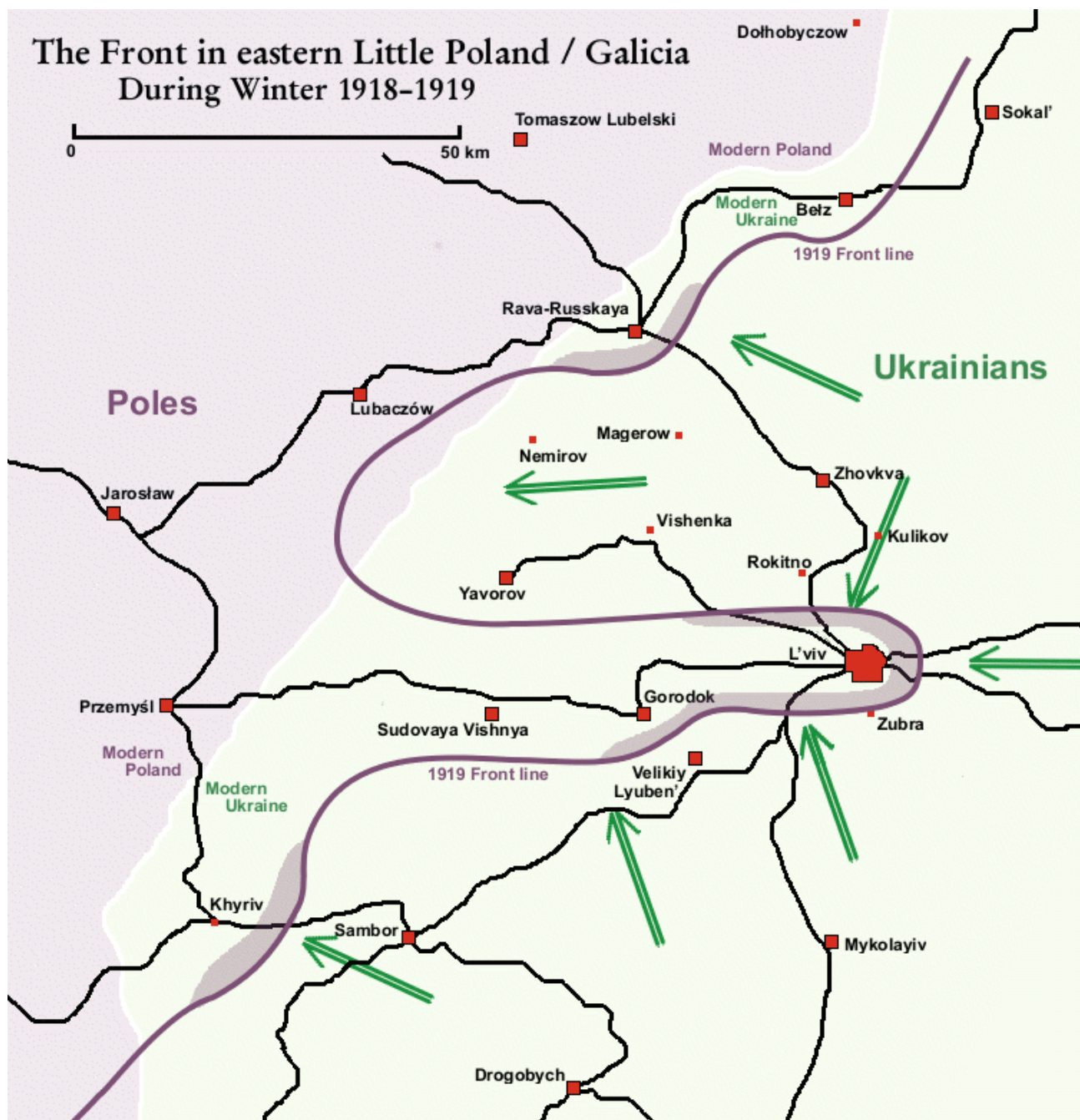
<sup>5</sup> Actually the greatest weakness of the UGA was its inability to provide sufficient war material, and particularly ammunition, as the war went on. By mid-1919 Hungary was fighting the Romanians and the Poles were able to cut off the link between the UGA and Czechoslovakia, basically dooming the Ukrainian cause.



who was already in direct liaison with the defenders of L'viv, decided on a plan that was risky but would assure great speed of action – instead of marching to the city in stages, he moved by rail. This bold plan succeeded completely. The transportation was made without serious obstacle: a weak Ukrainian attack towards Sudovaya Vishnya was easily repulsed. The rescue detachment, of about 140 officers and more than 1,200 men, arrived at L'viv on 20 November. On the next day, under the command of Colonel Tokarzewski, they combined with the city garrison to attack the part of the city occupied by the Ukrainians and its immediate surroundings. During the night, after a day's combat, the Ukrainians evacuated the town so that by the 22<sup>nd</sup> was entirely in Polish hands.

The delivery of L'viv did not at all put a stop to the Polish-Ukrainian struggle: indeed the city itself was to remain the focus of combat for many weeks yet.

Pushed back from L'viv, the Ukrainians occupied positions in the surrounding area, circling the town to the north, east and south. The Polish forces in L'viv were far too small to undertake a vigorous offensive to make the enemy retire further away. The immediate neighbourhood of the city was thus the scene of an incessant and bitter fight: the Poles holding basically to the defensive and the Ukrainians trying to break the Polish resistance and enter the town again. Their strongest and fiercest attacks were directed at the south, but with the aim of once more encircling the city. The peak of the fighting was at the end of December 1918 and into the first days of January 1919.



The second area of fighting was around Khyriv. The Ukrainians assembled relatively large forces there and, operating towards the north, tried to separate it from Przemyśl. The loss of this area would have placed the Polish group in L'viv in a very difficult situation, because it would have cut communications with the interior. The Ukrainians succeeded in the first days of December in closing in on Przemyśl, having beaten a weak Polish group organised from Sanok. But this success was erased by a newly formed group, commanded by General Zielinski, which unloaded at Przemyśl and threw the Ukrainians back behind Khyriv. An exploitation of the Polish success, in particular an operation aimed at the railway hub at Sambor, which was very useful for the Ukrainians' operations, was prevented by the need to withdraw from Zielinski's forces a portion to be sent immediately to assist a seriously threatened L'viv. The detachments left in the Khyriv region were organised into a group under the command of Colonel Minkiewicz, and were forced to content themselves with operations of a defensive character.

After L'viv and Khyriv, the third location which saw intense fighting was the outskirts of Rava-Russkaya, to the north of L'viv. This town was occupied on 27 November by Major Wieczorkiewicz's detachment, already noted above. Progressively sizeable forces were gathered here, as they arrived from the interior.

Thanks to this constant reinforcement, even if it came in dribs and drabs of fighting units, the effective strength of the Polish forces in eastern Little Poland reached about 20,000 men by the end of December 1918. The first important action to improve the situation in L'viv was undertaken by the Polish High Command at the start of January 1919. For this a concentration of forces was made in Rava-Russkaya under the command of General Romer – a special operations group – which was about 5,000 men, and therefore quite powerful in the circumstances. General Romer sent part of his forces to Dołhobyczów and Sokal' to cover the east and with the bulk of his forces attacked southwards. After a series of battles between 6 and 10 January he reached Zhovkva and Kulikov, forcing a passage through to L'viv.

This operation greatly increased the number of combatants in L'viv, but made no change to the general situation because the Ukrainian front momentarily broken to the north of L'viv wasted no time in reforming. General Romer retook command of the units newly arrived in the Rava-Russkaya areas, called the Bug Group.

The general situation established in eastern Little Poland at the end of 1918 and start of 1919 remained without great changes up until the first half of March 1919. The front started at Baligród on the Czech border in the Carpathians and headed east of the Khyriv–Przemyśl rail line (Colonel Minkiewicz group). Before reaching Przemyśl it turned east and continued between the Przemyśl–L'viv and Sambor–L'viv rail lines up to Velikiy Lyuben' (General Zielinski group). From there it circled round to the east and north of L'viv (L'viv Brigade, Colonel Kulinski group, Colonel Sikorski group). In the Rava-Russkaya and Belz area General Romer's group fought isolated.

There was no front, in the strict sense of the word, in this entire area. For both the Poles and Ukrainians there were large groupings of troops facing each other only in the Khyriv–Sambor, L'viv, Gorodok and Rava-Russkaya regions. But everywhere there was a war of partisans, whose principal focal point was the Przemyśl–Gorodok rail line. The activity of the weak Polish detachments, spread along this line, facing north and south succeeded in protecting this important communication line against the constant surprise attacks of the Ukrainian detachments who were trying to cut it, either from the north or south. A similar struggle went on for the Przemyśl–Jarosław–Rava-Russkaya line, always under threat from Ukrainian forces who occupied the angle formed by this line and the Przemyśl–L'viv line. The total Polish forces operating in eastern Little Poland was about 20,000 strong and was under the orders of General Rozwadowski's Eastern Command.

Operations of a large nature only started in the middle of February. Using their two to one numerical advantage<sup>1</sup> over the Poles and facing the threat of internal demoralisation of their army if the struggle continued for too long without any obvious gains, the Ukrainians started an attack on 14 February, following careful preparations. Their main forces executed a new attack directed on L'viv. A smaller group was sent from the south against the Przemyśl–L'viv rail line: it counted on interrupting the communications of L'viv with the interior to weaken the resistance of the defenders and thus assist the task of the main force. At the same time they attacked the Bug Group to prevent them coming to L'viv's aid. In the end the Ukrainians' plans failed completely. The dogged attacks on L'viv met an equally determined resistance from the Poles. The attempt to cut the rail line only had partial success.

However, the Polish front in eastern Little Poland was to find itself in a much worse position less than a month later. During the first days of March the Ukrainians renewed their attacks. This time they succeeded in definitively cutting the rail line, preventing all communication between L'viv and Przemyśl and isolating the Polish forces in L'viv from the interior.

L'viv was again encircled. The defenders were caught in the L'viv–Gorodok area and forced to fight on all sides.

The High Command fell obliged to intervene. A large number of reinforcements – 10 infantry battalions and some batteries, about 8,000 men – were quickly assembled and sent to Przemyśl under the command of General Iwazkiewicz. He was also given command of General Romer's group and Colonel Minkiewicz's group.

This effort by the High Command to send a rescue expedition also included, for the first time, the participation of the Army of Great Poland, which supplied three infantry battalions and artillery under the orders of Colonel Konarzewski.

<sup>1</sup> This would appear to be an exaggeration.



The attack started from Przemyśl down the length of the rail line: directed by General Alexandrowicz. On 20 March it reached Gorodok. From then on the Ukrainian belt around the defenders of L'viv was broken and communication re-established with the city.

At the same time as the counter-attack on L'viv, some strong attacks on General Romer's group at Rava-Russkaya and Belz were broken.

General Rozwadowski, commanding the "Eastern" Command, was recalled and General Iwaszkiewicz was given overall charge of all forces operating in Little Poland.

The double check to the Ukrainian offensive weakened their morale and broke their drive. General Iwaszkiewicz profited from this to correct his own situation with a number of successive actions. He commenced by clearing out the Ukrainian troops from the L'viv-Przemyśl-Rava-Russkaya triangle and then consolidated the L'viv-Rava-Russkaya front, giving this mission to Colonel Minkiewicz. Indeed in the last days of March the Ukrainian units were pushed back behind the line Rava-Russkaya-Nemirov-Vereshchitsa-Vishenka-Gorodok. A little later, in April, the city of L'viv was even given more freedom as the Ukrainians were pushed a little further east.

In the second half of April the situation of the Polish forces in eastern Little Poland was as follows:

In the Khyriv region there was Colonel Minkiewicz's group, now transformed by the general re-organisation of the army into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Legion Division and put under the command of General Zielinski;

To the north of this group, towards Sudovaya Vishnya was another sector occupied by a division in the process of forming – General Alekandrowicz's 4<sup>th</sup> ID.

Further east, operating on the line Velikiy Lyuben'-Nagorzany-Zubra was the Great Polish group under Colonel Konarzewski and General Sikorski's group.

L'viv was defended to the east and north by General Kraliczek-Krajowski's group.

From Rokitno, to the north of L'viv, and heading via Magerov and Rava-Russkaya was the Bug Group's sector, commanded by Colonel Berbecki, soon to be replaced by Colonel Minkiewicz. This group did no longer belong to the Eastern Command but was part of the Volhynian Front.

The forces engaged at this time in Little Poland had reached 60 infantry battalions, 45 artillery batteries and more than 12 cavalry squadrons.

It was soon after this time that the Little Poland Front was to abandon its defensive attitude of the previous four months and move over to decisive offensive operations, with the aim of completely freeing this province from Ukrainian domination.

At little after that the struggle in Volhynia also heated up. Here our adversaries were again Ukrainians, but not those with whom we disputed eastern Little Poland.

From the moment that the German troops had started to evacuate the occupied territories in the last stage of the Great War, the "Independent Ukrainian People's Republic"<sup>1</sup> established itself on Ukrainian territory with a Directory as provisional government.

The young Ukrainian republic, which from the very first days of its existence had had to fight against a Soviet Russia which clearly wanted to take its independence away, tried to extend itself by arms to the west, with the objective of taking Volhynia, a part of Polesia and finally threatening the Chełm region. At the end of December 1918 the Ukrainian troops, mostly partisans and in part raised by local organisations, neared the Bug under the command of Otaman<sup>2</sup> Oskilka.

Concerning the links between the two "sister republics" – Western Ukraine or eastern Little Poland on one side and the "Ukrainian People's Republic" (also known as the Dnieper Ukraine) on the other – they were quite distinct states, but there was a certain understanding between them, although it was rather ill-defined and hesitant. This understanding manifested itself more than once in military collaboration, to the extent of seeing units of the UNR Army inside units of the UGA. From a Polish viewpoint, the Volhynian combat front was the direct prolongation of the eastern Little Polish Front with their joining point at Rava-Russkaya being an important point for operations on L'viv. Thus the Poles were forced to treat the two fronts in many ways as if they were one, which resulted in the direction of operations in Volhynia and Little Poland ignoring both the former border of Eastern Galicia and the limits between the two enemy fronts.

To oppose the attempts of the Dnieper Ukrainians the Polish High Command created in December 1918 a weak group – no more than 2,000 men – under the command of General Majewski, soon replaced by General Rydz-Smigly, which was sent to the Bug near Włodawa, at the confluence of the *Huczwa*, tasked with defending the Chełm area.

<sup>1</sup> This is often known by its initials UNR (*Ukrainska Narodna Respublika*) and its government known as "the Directory" or by its leader, Simon Petliura.

<sup>2</sup> A revived rank in the Ukrainian system. Generally the partisan armies of the UNR were under little or no control of the Directory.



This group accomplished its mission, taking the offensive and moving east: on 24 January it occupied Vladimir-Volynskiy, and ten days later Kovel'. Using these two points as a base, the group immediately moved east again, fought the Ukrainians in a series of skirmishes and raids and pushed forward posts very near to the line of the Stokhod River.

The enemy assembled his forces along the Kovel'–Rivne rail line, in the Luts'k area, keeping weak groupings on the northern wing around Staryy Chartoriysk and on the south wing in the Torchin and *Poryck* region. The left wing established a link between Otaman Oskilka's front and the Galician Ukrainian's front, and supported their operations towards Dołhobyczow. The enemy forces grew constantly, especially in February. However in general the Ukrainians did not undertake large-scale operations and kept a relatively passive attitude, thanks to the danger posed by the victorious Soviet Russian troops coming from the east.

In the first days of April the Polish High Command reorganised itself and also the group in Volhynia. The command of that group, which in the meantime had grown to over 5,000 men, was passed from General Rydz-Smigly to General Babianski. His sector was basically unmodified and extended from Hrubieszów to Prilesnoye, via Vladimir-Volynskiy and the line of the Stokhod. However, he stopped being directly subordinate to the commander-in-chief and was placed under a newly created command in Volhynia, under General Karnicki. This also included the Bug Group (Colonel Berbecki, then Colonel Minkiewicz), previously subordinate to the "Eastern Command", which occupied the front from Rokitno–Magerow–Ugnev–Belz.

The Volhynia front kept this organisation, without major changes in the military situation, up to the middle of May. Then it marched forward in liaison with the decisive offensive in Little Poland.

### 3– Establishment of a Polish-Russian Front

Our neighbours to the east of the liberated Polish territory were initially the German troops, who for many months had occupied the Ukraine, Belorussia<sup>1</sup> and the Baltic lands. These troops, starting from the German revolution and the Armistice on the Western Front, had started to evacuate the occupied regions.

In the interests of Poland, as also for the commanders of the German troops in the east, it was important that the evacuation take place as rapidly as possible and in the most secure conditions for both parties. By virtue of an understanding between the representatives of the Polish High Command and their German counterparts, the rail line Kovel'–Brest–Białystok–Grajewo was left as a line of communication to the west. Approximately parallel to the west of this was the Polish-German demarcation line, the defence of which on the Polish side was assured at the start by small detachments specially sent for this mission by the Warsaw and Lublin General Regions. Later, as things became more organised, the line was occupied by General Iwaszkiewicz's Lithuanian-Belorussian Division and General Listowski's Podlachian Group. Apart from some small and sporadic encounters, it was generally calm on the demarcation line. The finish of the evacuation was predicted for February 1919.

Thus it seemed that there was no direct threat to Poland from the east, apart from the Ukrainians, with whom it was already fighting. But soon an indirect danger was sensed to the north-east, from Soviet Russia.

Revolutionary Russia had recognised the principle of Poland's independence. The Soviet government had, more than once, given assurances of this in the course of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations.<sup>2</sup> It had stressed that the future borders of Poland, as with the borders of the other states born from the ruins of Tsarist Russia, would be decided by free negotiations between the interested parties. Russia's insistence on the right to self-determination for the new states was at that time directed against Germany, which for the moment ruled the territory of those states. But from the November Revolution, Russia's true politics became clear – politically aggressive and imperialistic – the difference from before being just that the former Tsarist imperialism had changed into a revolutionary imperialism, which saw the spread of revolution into the areas detached from Russia as a means with which to incorporate them once more.

It did not take long for the thoughts to become deeds. On 17 November the Soviet Russian troops began their march westwards, following on the heels of the retreating Germans, and by the end of 1918 had succeeded in occupying without resistance a large part of Lithuania and Belorussia and, partially, Latvia and Estonia.

The western advance of the Russian army was too menacing for Poland, both from the point of view of its current situation as well as what the advance might mean for the future configuration of its borders, to not provoke a reaction from it. So the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief decided to "make an effort to keep as far as possible from the places where a new life was starting and growing, all attempts and all efforts to once more impose on us a foreign way of life, a life which we had not chosen for ourselves."

<sup>1</sup> Przybylski refers to "White Ruthenia" throughout his text, which is very old-fashioned. I have stuck to "Belorussia" to remind readers that he is talking of the historic region and not the modern country of Belarus, although largely the same area.

<sup>2</sup> A trifle misleading. The Bolsheviks did indeed loudly proclaim the right to "self-determination" for all peoples, but at no time did they recoil from their previously stated positions of world revolution, though they stressed this somewhat less after the October Revolution. Self-determination was to **follow** Marxist takeover, not precede it. The following war between Poland and Russia was not about Lenin's hypocritical desire to restore Poland to a Russian empire, contrary to the view expressed here, but about whether Poland would or would not be a Communist ruled entity. Note that after WWII, when Poland became Communist it remained a separate country whereas, by contrast, the Baltic states were forcibly merged into constituent "republics" of the USSR.







It is clear that the task could only be achieved by force of arms: all diplomatic protests had no results.

Here again the obstacle was the presence of the German troops to the east of Poland: leaving their progressively abandoned territory to the Russians, they made it impossible for Poland to offer any resistance to the march of the Soviet army. Attempts made in December by the Polish High Command to direct Polish troops across the regions occupied by the Germans with the aim of establishing a cordon against the Russians, in particular to keep the Russians from Vilnius, had no result, or rather gave it only at the moment when the Red invasion was almost at the borders of the Congress Kingdom.

So during the whole winter of 1918-1919, the only military elements working for Polish aims in Lithuania and Belorussia were the organisations called "self-defence", which were created spontaneously and which were supported by the Polish High Command. These organisations were still too weak for such a role, even if not very the task was not particularly large, all the more so since the Germans opposed their development at each step. During the first days of January 1919 the self-defence units tried, and failed, to hold Vilnius and so to curb the ultimate progression of the Russians towards Poland.

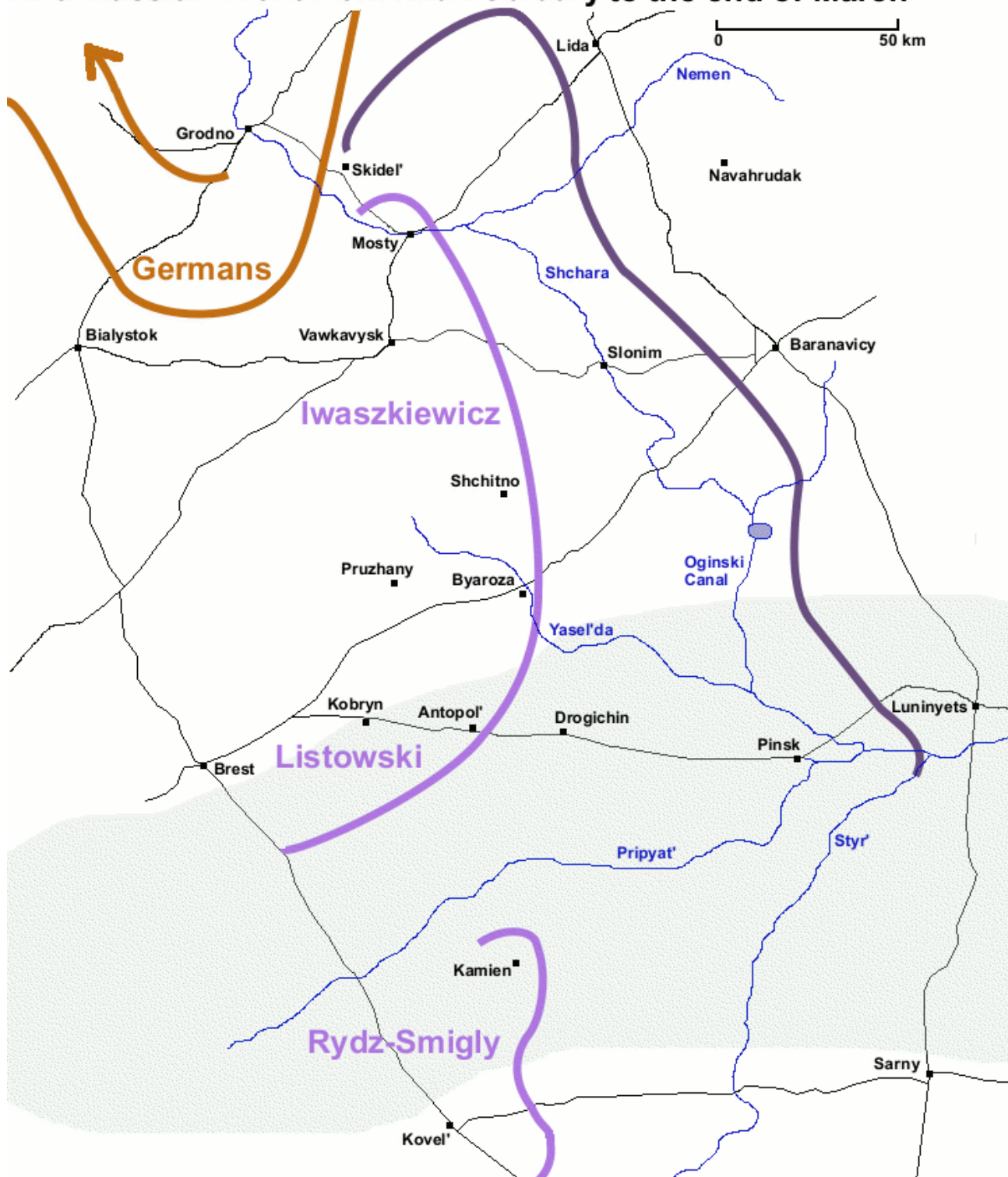


An understanding with the Germans only came with the mediation of the Allies, at the start of February 1919. The Germans agreed to not allow Soviet troops into the areas abandoned by them if the German troops had not been replaced there by Polish ones. As a result of this accord, during the period 9 to 14 February the first Polish detachments penetrated the German zone and occupied the line of the Nemen via Skidel'-Zel'vyany-Ruzhany-Pruzhany-Kobryn, and then Bialystok, abandoned by the Germans.

Several days later Polish troops met the advanced guards of the Soviets, who were arriving in the Vilnius, Baranavičy and Pinsk areas. From that time onwards there was a Polish-Russian front.

The troops sent to oppose the Russians were weak. They were principally in the Lithuanian-Belorussian Division, already noted above, and the rest in the Podlachian Group. Their strength, at the beginning of the front's formation, did not exceed 12 infantry battalions, 12 squadrons and 3 batteries, incompletely organised and badly equipped.

## Anti-Russian Front from mid-February to the end of March



The front was divided into two sectors. From north of Skidel' to Shchitno was occupied by General Iwaszkiewicz's operational group, with the mission of defending the Vawkavysk region. It linked up on its left with the German troops, who still held the Grodno area. The sector south of Shchitno to the Pripyat' was occupied by General Listowski's operational group. His advanced units were established on the most important lines of communication: the Byaroza area (the Brest–Baranavičy line) and the Antopol' area (the Brest–Pinsk line).

The situation remained like this for the two groups, while skirmishing and a very active reconnaissance went on, up until the first days of March. Then, on the initiative of the two commanders, they started offensive operations with the aim of occupying positions more favourable for the defence.

These operations were extremely successful. Iwaszkiewicz's group, now commanded by General Szeptycki, seized Slonim on 2 March, and occupied the line of the Shchara. A specially formed group, called the Outer Nemen Group advantageously extended our lines to the north of the Nemen. General Listowski's group took Pinsk on 5 March and occupied the line of the Yasel'da and the Oginski Canal.

This line was assigned by the High Command as the principal line of defence: the two groups, in view of their lack of strength, were to avoid engaging in adventurous offensive actions on a large scale and were to be content with acting with small units to the front of the principal line, continually harassing the enemy to prevent him attacking in force.

The operations conducted in this spirit gave excellent results, principally in General Szeptycki's sector. Thanks to a series of raids the units under his orders remained masters of a large zone between the Shchara and the Lida–Baranavičy railway line, and even temporarily occupied Baranavičy itself. To the north of the Nemen, the advanced elements pushed on towards the Ditva, almost up to Lida itself.

This state of affairs remained until the middle of April, the time of the first large scale offensive operation on Vilnius.

#### **4 – Struggle for Cieszyn-Silesia**

*To be done some other time, perhaps.*

#### **5 – Insurrection in Greater Poland**

*To be done some other time, perhaps.*

From a political viewpoint, liberated Great Poland kept its independent character from the rest of the country up until the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The People's Council continued to constitute the sovereign authority, independent of the Warsaw government.

In a similar way, the Army of Great Poland was not subordinate to the High Command. Co-operation with the GHQ was limited to a reciprocal understanding. The fusion of the Great Polish army into the rest of the Polish Armed Forces was only carried out on 1 August 1919. Up until then only a small portion of this army, in the form of special groups, took part in Poland's wars to the east.

The first units from Great Poland made their appearance in eastern Little Poland in the dark days of March. Later, having received reinforcements, they took part in the May offensive. On the Russian front, the first units from Great Poland only arrived at the end of July 1919.

