

The Ukrainian-Polish War in Galicia

by O. Horbač – taken from Ukraine: a Concise Encyclopedia

This war originated as an uprising of the Polish national minority in Galicia against the Western Ukrainian National Republic and soon developed into a war of the new Polish state against Ukraine.

The Ukrainian-Polish hostilities in Galicia began on November 1, 1918, when Polish underground organizations in Lviv under the command of Captain Maczynski rose up against the Ukrainian government. Similar uprisings of a local character were undertaken by Polish nationalist groups in the cities of Sambir, Boryslav, and Peremyshl and in the Lemkian area; these groups took advantage of the favorable attitude of the commanders of the Austro-Hungarian garrisons, remaining there after the fall of the Habsburg monarchy. With the exception of the Lemkian area, these Polish uprisings were completely put down at the beginning of November, 1918, by local and neighboring Ukrainian military units.

Active military support of this uprising by the Polish Warsaw government in early November, 1918, led to the beginning of the war between Poland and Western Ukraine. Up to the end of 1918, military aid to the Polish insurgents came chiefly from Polish western Galicia, but after January, 1919, from the entire Polish state; the divisions of General Joseph Haller, which had been outfitted in France for war with the Bolsheviks, but which were deployed in this war, had the decisive effect on the outcome of the conflict.

The Fighting in Lviv (November 1–21, 1918)

The Central Military Committee was formed in Lviv (see p. 771) with Captain Dmytro Vitovsky as leader and had about 60 officers and 1,200 men – Ukrainians from Austrian units stationed in the city. The operation was headed by the Ukrainian General Command (renamed on November 18, 1918, the High Command). These original forces of the Central Military Committee generally were poorly prepared for combat. Consequently, the Ukrainian General Command tried quickly to transfer the Battalion of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen to Lviv from Bukovina with reinforcements from other localities of Galicia. The late arrival of the Riflemen and the slow influx of reinforcements from the provinces influenced the failure of the Western Ukrainians in the battle in Lviv.

In Lviv, the Polish uprising started at noon on November 1, 1918, in the southern section of the city, the so-called Novyi Svit (New World); an attack from there by the Poles on November 2 resulted in the capture of the freight station with the weapons and munitions reserves. On the nights of November 2–3, the Poles occupied the main station which had been left by its Ukrainian garrison and attacked other Ukrainian positions. The Ukrainian forces were too small to energetically oppose the Polish attack. The Sich Riflemen aid did not arrive and a crisis in the Ukrainian command resulted. Colonel (formerly Captain) Vitovsky was replaced by Colonel N. Marynovych. Further indecision and the lack of counterattacks by the Ukrainians encouraged the Poles to new attacks and allowed them to secure further territory in the western and central parts of the city. The arrival of the first detachments of the Sich Riflemen on November 3 did not change this situation, and they made several unsuccessful attacks on the Polish positions from the south.

On November 5, Colonel Gregory Kossak became the chief commander. With reinforcements hastily brought from the country, he tried unsuccessfully to force the enemy from the center of the city. Until the end of the Lviv operations (November 22), the front was stabilized, with slight local changes, on a line from the north to the south of the city, with the western part of Lviv in Polish hands.

On November 9, Colonel Hnat Stefaniv took over the high command and made a series of attacks on the northern and southern sections of the city (Zamarstyniv, the Cadet School). Only the operations in the north (at Zamarstyniv) were successful, and this section was cleared of armed civilian bands. The Gonta Detachment from central Ukraine under Otaman A. Dolud co-operated in this operation. At last Ukrainian successes undermined the self-confidence of the enemy who began to ask for help from Warsaw. On the other hand, the Poles proposed new conferences and an armistice (November 18–21) to gain time to secure strength in numbers. In the second ten days of fighting in Lviv, the Poles had about 660 officers and about 4,000 men.

The new battle (November 21) began with signs of complete Polish superiority in numbers; on November 20, they had received help from Peremyshl under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tokarzewski (140 officers, 1,250 soldiers and 8 cannon). By the evening of November 21, the south wing of the Polish forces had broken through to the eastern outskirts of the city (the Lychakiv railroad station). Colonel Stefaniv, afraid of being surrounded, ordered the Ukrainian units to leave the city on the night of the 21–22, despite the desire of the Ukrainian garrison to fight to the last man.

The Fighting on the Northwestern Frontiers of Western Ukraine at the Beginning of November, 1918

Beyond Lviv, the battles with the Poles extended to the western frontiers. In this area, the Poles occupied Peremyshl and Yaroslav on November 1. With the aid of Ukrainians gathered from the villages, Peremyshl was liberated on November 4, but under further pressure from the Poles the city was lost again on November 11, this time for good. The loss of Peremyshl was the first definite and important victory of the foe, for the possession of this city allowed the Galician Polish minority to keep a direct connection with Cracow and to receive reinforcements in Lviv.



Polish resistance in Lviv was the beginning of military actions in which the entire Polish state later took part. Beside the detachments of Tokarzewski and General B. Roja, who came to Lviv from Cracow (November 20), two Polish groups entered the Western Ukrainian territory: one from Nowy Sacz, which occupied Khyriv on November 20, and one from Lublin, which occupied Rava Ruska on November 27. Their further advance was stopped by Ukrainian units. Both of these railroad centers, Khyriv and Rava Ruska, like Lviv and the Horodok Yahailonsky, were the chief objects of the Ukrainian-Polish efforts, up to February, 1919. The task of the High Command of the UHA (Ukrainian Galician Army) was to expel the foe beyond the Ukrainian ethnic boundaries and to make the state frontiers secure. Up to February, 1919, it tried to concentrate its frontal attacks on Lviv which was occupied by Poles and at the same time neglected to cut their railroad connection through Peremyshl with Poland. This gave the enemy the opportunity to throw new forces from other fronts into threatened Lviv. The Polish operations until the end of November, 1918, were led by the Dowództwo Wschod – Eastern Command – of the Polish army under General Rozwadowski.

The Organization of the Ukrainian Galician Army (UHA)

The first months after the withdrawal from Lviv were used by the High Command of the Western Ukrainian forces (which had gone to Berezhany and then to Khodoriv) to reorganize its units first into fighting groups and in January, 1919, into three corps. In the first months of the Polish-Ukrainian war, the Western Ukrainian forces were composed only of volunteer units such as the Sich Riflemen, other Ukrainian soldiers from the Austrian army, and irregular guerrilla units of local peasants who placed themselves at the disposal of the Western Ukrainian government. Later on, the newly organized Ukrainian Galician Army was reinforced by mobilized men of the military districts, into which Western Ukraine was divided. Staff and higher officers was a pressing need of the UHA; they were secured chiefly from former officers of the Austro-Hungarian army, who were primarily German, Hungarian, and Czech by nationality. At the request of the government of Western Ukraine, some of the eastern Ukrainian higher officers (that is, of the Ukrainian National Republic) were sent to the UHA (especially General Michael Omelianovych-Pavlenko, Commanding General of the UHA from December 10, 1918. and General Alexander Hrekov, who commanded the UHA from June 9, 1919, to July 5, 1919, and others).

In the later phase of the war, the UHA had difficulty in securing weapons and ammunition. In Galicia, there were only relatively few war supplies and these chiefly fell into Polish hands after the loss of Lviv and Peremyshl. The Galician forces could count on supplies of munitions only from neutral, but friendly, Czechoslovakia. The Polish offensive in May, 1919, which closed this line of communication, caused the defeat of the UHA in June, 1919.

The Fighting for Lviv

From November 22 to the end of December, 1918, a series of local operations were carried on by both sides near Lviv and particularly in the northern sector of the Ukrainian front (Rava Ruska, Liubachiv, Chesaniv, Yaroslav, etc.) and in the south (Khyriv, Peremyshl). The Ukrainians took the initiative in the operations, which were chiefly carried on to secure cities and frontier stretches held by the Poles. However, these Ukrainian operations did not have a systematic or sustained character; they were mostly fought by separate groups without close operative liaison. This permitted the Poles, who had very good communications, to throw their reinforcements in to the threatened sectors of the front and even to win further territory.

In December, 1918, Polish numerical superiority was more evident on the entire front. Yet the command of the UHA decided upon a general concentric attack on Lviv as a prelude to further action on the entire front. However, the plan for this first offensive on Lviv did not succeed, for prior to the start of the operation the enemy shattered the chief Ukrainian striking force (the Koziatyn Shock Brigade) which was concentrated to the southwest of the city (villages Navariia and Oboroshyn). After battles near Lviv on December 27, 1918–January 2, 1919, there was a short pause at the front. During December, 1918, both hostile forces occupied permanent positions and divided their armed forces more or less equally on all fronts (for the course of the front line, see the map). On January 5, 1919, the command of the operations of the Polish forces in Western Ukraine was taken over by the General Command located in Warsaw. The very weak opposition of the German forces in the Poznan area and the armistice on the Czech front in Silesia allowed the Poles to throw the majority of their forces against the Western Ukrainians. On January 8, the Poles took the offensive with the object of clearing Ukrainian troops from the area between the railroad lines Lviv–Peremyshl and Lviv–Rava Ruska–Yaroslav; but their only success was the breakthrough of the strong Polish detachment of General J. Romer from Rava Ruska through Zhovkva to Lviv (January 10–11, 1919). At the same time the Ukrainians tried to recapture Lviv. As of January, the force of this attack lay to the south of the city. A number of villages near Lviv were occupied, but further advance was stopped by strongly fortified Polish positions on the outskirts of the city. On the other hand, the Polish attack, begun on January 13, brought no significant change in the fighting line except for slight local gains to the southwest of Lviv. After this, the sector near Lviv became quiet again for a month. The active sectors were those of the First Ukrainian Galician Corps; here at the end of January, 1919, the Poles captured Uhniv and Belz (January 28). The latter place, which they strongly fortified, became their base of operations in further campaigns to the east and north. The Ukrainians attacked Belz and Rava Ruska. On the front line of the Third Corps, the Poles began, on February 4, new scouting attacks in the region of Khyriv, but these ended with their defeat.



The Vovchukhiv Operation

After the two unsuccessful attempts to recapture Lviv, the High Command of the UHA saw that the decisive point of the Ukrainian offensive should be executed from west of the city and decided to cut the railroad between Lviv and Peremyshl, throwing a ring around Lviv and linking the front of the First and Second Corps to the west. The plan of this operation foresaw the capture of the line on the sector Horodok–Sudova Vyshnia by co-ordinated actions from the north and south (the so-called Vovchukhiv operation) with a new attack on Lviv. On February 15, Ukrainian units captured a number of villages near the railroad Horodok–Sudova Vyshnia. The road in this sector was in range of Ukrainian machine gun fire, and the movement first of ordinary trains and then, on February 20, of armored trains was stopped. At the same time, Lviv was attacked from the north, from Holosko and Zboiška. The further development of this attack was halted by the arrival of the military mission of the Entente under French General Berthélemy (see p. 774); military operations began again on March 2. The efforts of the Poles were directed at throwing back the Ukrainian troops from the Lviv–Peremyshl railroad line near the village of Vovchukhiv (March 7), but were unsuccessful. At the beginning of March, 1919, new Polish forces reached Peremyshl from central and western Poland. They launched a successful counterattack toward Horodok (March 12), and, on March 19, the Polish units succeeded in gaining control of the Lviv–Peremyshl line again and also in throwing the Ukrainian units beyond the line Mageriv–Nemyriv in the north. The proposal of the Council of Four of the Entente on March 19 to stop hostilities was accepted by the Galician Army Command, but the Poles did not reply and made new attacks, especially on the front of the First Galician Corps in the northern sector. There, by the end of March, the Poles had taken Krakovets and Yavoriv, and had reached the line Yaniv–Mageriv.

The Polish Offensive of General Haller

Despite the promise not to use the Polish divisions of General Haller, which were recruited and trained in France for strengthening Polish defense against Russian Bolsheviks, against the Ukrainians, the Polish government sent them to the anti-Ukrainian front. On April 19, these units successfully attacked the Ukrainian positions southwest of Lviv, on April 20, they broke through the Ukrainian front south of the city, and, on April 29, they threw the Ukrainian forces from their positions on the north and east of the city, thus placing Lviv beyond the range of Ukrainian artillery bombardment. Severe battles also took place on the front of the First Galician Corps.

The proposals of the High Command of the Ukrainian Galician forces on May 1 and May 9 for an armistice were unanswered by the Poles. The plan for a line of demarcation, drawn up by the South African General L. Botha in the name of the Entente's Council of Four in order to arrange an armistice, was accepted by the Western Ukrainian government (May 13, 1919) but was rejected by the Poles. The Polish delegation to the international peace conference, headed by R. Dmowski, asserted that there were "Bolshevik elements" within the Ukrainian Galician Army.

In the middle of May, 1919, the Poles launched a general attack on the Ukrainian positions in Galicia and southern Volhynia. The chief blows of General Haller's divisions were aimed at Sambir (defended by Third Galician Corps) and on Volhynia (Lutsk) against the forces of the Ukrainian National Republic. On May 15, four Polish divisions broke through the southern sector of the Ukrainian front (groups Krukenychi–Volchyshchovychi–Husakiv) toward Sambir. From there, the Ukrainian units (Khyriv group and the Mountain Brigade) which were cut off from the main Galician forces retreated south through the Carpathians to Czechoslovakia, where they were disarmed and interned.

By a simultaneous attack in the north and on the central sector, the enemy took Lutsk (May 16), Krystynopil, Mosty Velyki, Zhovkva, Rudky, Komarno, and Sambir. The front of the Third Galician Corps, disorganized and unsupported, retreated to the east. As a result of these attacks in Volhynia and on the south sector, the First and Third Ukrainian Galician Corps were forced to retreat to the southeast. By May 24, Polish units had reached the line Bolekhiv–Khodoriv–Bibrka–Buzk. The intention of the Galician High Command to stop the Polish units at the Zolota Lypa River and to begin a counteroffensive was abandoned because of the attack by Rumania in the south, which after the ultimatum of May 23, occupied the southeastern part of Western Ukraine (see p. 775). Since an active attack by the Rumanian army could threaten the rear of the Western Ukrainian forces, the Ukrainian units were moved into the triangle formed by the rivers Zbruch–Dniester and the railroad line Husiatyn–Chortkiv–Zalishchyky.

The Chortkiv Offensive and the Retreat from Western Ukraine

After a short rest and reorganization, the Ukrainian units on June 7 began an attack by two brigades, the so-called June offensive, or the offensive of General Hrekov, who was Commanding General of Galician forces. At that time, the Galician forces had about 25,000 men (about 45 battalions of infantry, 40 batteries and a few hundred cavalry). After successful attacks on Yaholnytsia–Chortkiv–Kopychyntsi, there were skilful maneuvers on Buchach and Terebovlia, and an attack developed along the left bank of the Dniester towards Halych. The Polish forces were thrown back from the line Ternopil–Terebovlia, resistance was broken near Yazlivets, and in the second half of June the leading Galician units reached the line Dniester–Hnyla Lypa–Peremyshliany–Pidkamin.

After these successes the army and the people were filled with enthusiasm; all who were able to fight voluntarily joined the ranks of the Army. But the lack of arms and munitions nullified the value of this victory; from among the 90,000 volunteers at the recruiting stations, only 15,000 could be taken. In the May retreat, the Galician Army had been compelled to leave large supplies of munitions behind, and their lack was now keenly felt. Moreover, the army did not



have the strength to open a Carpathian road to the Czechoslovak border where the transportation of munitions had been arranged near Lavochne. So the territorial successes of this campaign lost all importance. At the height of its military success, the Ukrainian Galician High Command refused to accept the armistice terms and the demarcation line (the so-called Delvig line – see Fig. 478), which the mission of the army of the Ukrainian National Republic and the Ukrainian Galician Army signed with the Poles in Lviv on June 10.

New troops, hurriedly assembled by the Poles on June 25, forced the Galician forces, which suffered from a total lack of munitions, to retreat to its starting point in the triangle between the Zbruch and the Dniester. The extreme lack of shells did not allow the infantry to stop the enemy, and the withdrawal was chiefly protected by the artillery. Only the weak pressure of the Polish units and the skilled planning of the retreat kept the Ukrainian Galician Army from annihilation.

Since further struggle with the invading Polish army of approximately 110,000 men which France had equipped with all modern military and technical means was hopeless, the Galician units on July 16–18, 1919, crossed the Zbruch into central Ukraine to help the Ukrainian National Republic in its struggle against the Russian Bolsheviks who invaded Ukraine from the northeast.



Головні шляхи походів Корпусів Галицької Армії під час славетної Чортківської офензиви в днях 8—28 червня 1919 р.

Map of the Chortkiv Offensive from Ukraïns'ka Halyc'ka Armija : vojenno-istoryčna studija.

