

Chełm during the Battle of Warsaw 1920.

Zbigniew Lubaszewski

The Battle of Warsaw is an event primarily associated with the defensive struggle near Warsaw and the Polish counter-offensive from the banks of the Wieprz River which, by smashing the troops of Mikhail Tukhachevski's Soviet Western Front, ultimately decided the victory of the Polish army.

An integral element of the operations were the battles fought to the east of Lublin, connected with the defence of the line of the Bug River line, covering the concentration of Polish troops on the lower Wieprz River and also with stopping the formations of the Soviet South-Western Front and Semën Budënný's 1st Horse Army, which had already received the task of supporting Tukhachevski's troops near Warsaw. One of the main areas of military operations was in the vicinity of Chełm, and the fierce clashes to hold the city played an important role in the final outcome of the war. The article presented here aims to give an overview of those battles.

The eastern Lublin region found itself in the region of intense warfare at the beginning of August 1920, when the 3rd Army, under the command of General Zygmunt Zieliński, operating on the northern wing of the Polish South-Eastern Front, reached the Bug River. That formation was facing the Soviet 12th Army, which was part of the South-Western Front.

On 1 August Nikolai Sollohub's Soviet 16th Army pushed General Władysław Sikorski's Polesie Group out of the Brest fortress, thus thwarting Polish plans for a counter-attack from above the Bug River into the wing of the Soviet Western Front advancing towards Warsaw. As a result the 3rd Army was ordered to withdraw to the Bug River on 2 August. Its task was defined as follows:

... by quickly executing the retreat, occupy the prepared defensive line on the Bug River, in good order and as far as possible without contact with the enemy, and prevent the enemy from forcing the Bug River and endangering our rear.

The designated defence line was reached by the first units on 5 August. On the evening of 3 August, the Army command arrived in Chełm, which was then also the headquarters of the South-Eastern Front. The 3rd Army numbered some 19,000 soldiers. On 5 August the Army commander ordered the retirement of its individual subunits over a length of about 150 kilometres – from Sławatycze to Hrubieszów.

The 7th Legion Infantry Division, commanded by General Karol Szubert, was deployed in the centre, between Włodawa and Chełm, where the main Soviet attack was expected. Its task was to defend the Włodawa – Lubartów and Chełm – Lublin routes. That formation had two infantry brigades (13th and 14th) and secured in the initial phase of the operation (6-8 August) the section from Włodawa to Uhrusk. Its objective was to break up the enemy columns marching towards Włodawa, and to secure the bridgehead of the Kowel – Chełm railway line. That latter task was carried out by Captain Zygmunt Zajchowski's group.

The southern wing of the 3rd Army was the 3rd Legion Infantry Division, which defended the Włodzimierz Wołyński – Zamość line. The Ukrainian 6th Division remained as the Army reserve in Szczepieszyn.

The opponents of the 3rd Army was the Soviet 12th Army, also numbering about 19,000 soldiers, consisting of the 58th Rifle Division, whose task was to cross the Bug River in the vicinity of Włodawa; the 25th Rifle Division with the task of advancing to the Dorohusk – Chełm line; and on the southern wing, with the task of capturing Hrubieszów and advancing further west were the 7th Rifle Division operating with the Bashkir Brigade; and the 25th Rifle Division with a cavalry brigade.

The 7th ID reached the Bug on 5 August. The Polish troops were followed by units of Bolshevik cavalry, which crossed the river near Husynne, but were broken up and forced to retreat. The defence of the river proved quite difficult, mainly due to the lack of prepared defensive positions (often the line troops had to prepare the positions themselves). The full concentration of the 3rd Army was set for the evening hours of 6 August. Later that night Polish units were to carry out offensive operations in the Sławatycze area. The 14th Infantry Brigade was to reach the Uhrusk region on 7 August, while the 13th Infantry Brigade was to go to the Włodawa area. Clashes also occurred in the southern part of the front, in the Dubienka area, where the river was also forced by cavalry units.

Further clashes in the defence of the Bug were fought by police officers. On 5 August, 18 officers from the Świerże post prevented Bolshevik cavalry and infantry from crossing the river, stopping the enemy until the army arrived. On the same day, 12 policemen from the Dorohusk post held the bridge there, also until the arrival of the army. A slightly different account of this event was given by the then district commander of the State Police, Jan Kotlarewicz, in a report describing the events that took place over 1-21 August. According to his account, the policemen fired all their ammunition and retreated from the river.

The first clashes with regular formations also took place in the Świerże area, where units of the 27th Infantry Regiment were attacked by a dismounted cavalry unit. The Poles managed to repel the attack. Around noon on 6 August, the Bolsheviks launched an attack on the bridgehead at Dorohusk. After several hours of fighting, they managed to capture both the eastern bridgehead, fortified by the Poles, and both bridges over the Bug. However, their action failed to capture the western side of the river. On the following day, another Bolshevik attack there also failed. However, north of Swierże they captured the hamlet of Mielniki, where they built a makeshift bridge, and they began to move infantry and artillery across. The units of the 14th Brigade, on the orders of General Szubert, were supported by the 13th Brigade, which sent one battalion to the Swierże area.

In the following days, the Bolsheviks concentrated their attacks on the Uhrusk – Dorohusk section. They sought to break the Polish defence line, using Swierże as a base. The advance of the Bolshevik troops, mainly against the 14th Brigade's positions, caused General Zieliński to issue an order for the 7th Division to abandon the line of the Bug, mainly due to fear of encirclement by Bolshevik troops from the Włodawa area. The Bolsheviks gained a clear advantage, advancing with rapid marches to Chełm. Both brigades of the 7th Division left their positions on the evening of 8 August. The 13th Brigade concentrated in the Sawin area and the 14th Brigade in the Chełm area. The Polish forces also included the Stefan Batory Volhynian Volunteer Regiment (400 men), some stage units, the 1st Battalion of the 132nd Infantry Regiment and the armoured train *Zagończyk*.

The results of the defensive battles of 6-7 August forced the commander of the Central Front, General Edward Rydz-Śmigły, who had already moved from Chełm to Lublin, to issue an order on 8 August for the 3rd Army to move to the Wieprz River line and cover General Stefan Skierski's 4th Army's concentration (redirected from the Northern Front) from the east and north-east, as well as tie up the enemy seeking to outflank General Wacław Iwaszkiewicz's 6th Army (transferred to the Southern Front). The move of the 3rd Army's positions over the Wieprz River meant that Chełm and the Chełm area had to be evacuated. Details of that can be seen in the report of the previously noted Jan Kotlarewicz:

At that time evacuation fever prevailed throughout Chełm. The wagons needed for evacuation purposes, after a few days of waiting, were still not delivered, and the whole burden of removing state property and civil offices fell on the police. During the final three days, 6th to 8th, they delivered over 1,800 wagons for the evacuation of the civil and military authorities, lending only in a few necessary cases, as in the case of the administration cash wagons, a small escort in order not to disperse critical people during those days. On the last day, i.e. on the 8th, the last offices left in wagons and carts, and the *Starost* Mr Fijałkowski left the city.

The 14th Brigade was to defend Chełm for as long as possible. The Wieprz line, which was to be defended until at least 17 August, showed that the Supreme Command's most important objective was to prepare the counter-offensive from the Wieprz, even at the price of giving up the area between the Wieprz and Bug. Pilsudski assumed that his attack on the southern flank of the Soviet North-Western Front would result in the abandonment of the land seized by the Soviet 12th Army.

The order which directed the defence of Chełm was received by the 7th Division commander on 9 August. Some of the division's formations were to defend the city, while other units were to conduct offensive actions to slow the advance of the Bolshevik forces. Chełm was protected from the north by the 13th Brigade, which was stationed in the Sawin area. Similar tasks were given to sub-units of the 3rd Infantry Division, one of whose brigades was to strike from the Grabowiec area through Białopole on to the flank of the Soviet 25th Division advancing on Chełm, while the Ukrainian 6th Division was to defend positions in Sielce.

As part of the mobilisation of all possible forces, on 8 August, police formations from individual stations drawn to Chełm were placed under the orders of the Army. They were formed into an infantry battalion under the command of Commissar Kotlarewicz, made up of two companies commanded by Sub-Commissars Bolesław Grabowski and Ignacy Miński. The unit had 250 policemen and a mounted scout detachment as well as wagons with a kitchen. It was directed to the south of Chełm, in the area of Pokrówka, where it created fortified positions.

On 9 August, the soldiers of the 7th Division, tired from the retreat march, were concentrated in and around Chełm. The state of the division is well reflected in the words of Colonel Stanisław Borowiec, its Chief of Staff:

Following days of stubborn fighting, exertion and drudgery, and after an all-night march, the staff of the 7th Division was physically completely exhausted. The staff officers, not excluding the division commander, marched the entire way from the Bug River on foot, unable to support themselves even on horseback, propping each other up.

The city was garrisoned by the 14th Brigade, to which all formations located in Chełm were subordinated. The 13th Brigade was concentrated in the Horodyszczce – Malowane area. The armoured train *Zagończyk* patrolled the lines Chełm – Dorohusk (it dispersed an enemy approach in the Brzeźno area) and Chełm – Włodawa. General Szubert also ordered the commencement of fortification works on the eastern and northern outskirts of the town, and Captain Bolesław Szwarzenberger-Czerny, appointed commander of the town's garrison, was ordered to organise a police service with the help of the gendarmerie (in the first place it was to guard the railway station). In addition, it was intended to set up a civilian Civic Guard with the participation of the city's inhabitants.

On 10 August, units of the 7th Division, to which the police battalion had been incorporated (into the combined battalion of the 14th Infantry Brigade), carried out reconnaissance of the foreground, finding few enemy forces. At 18:00 the 3rd Army command ordered one brigade to advance to the Sawin – Piaski area, but in view of the falling darkness, the order was not carried out until 07:00 on 11 August. By 13:00 the 13th Brigade had managed to capture Sawin after a short battle. In the evening it reached the Tomaszówka area, driving the Bolsheviks back to the north. The following day the brigade continued north-west, but it was stopped in the Tarnów area by units of the Soviet 172nd Brigade and, after losing a battle, withdrew back to the Sawin area. It was probably on this day that the police battalion carried out an effective attack on the village of Strupin, which had been occupied by Soviet units.

As well as the regular army units, resistance to the Bolsheviks was attempted by police stations. Such clashes took place, for example, in Żmudź, during the Battle of Warsaw 1920, where the entire police station was taken prisoner by the Soviets. A similar situation occurred in Rakołupy, where some policemen found themselves in enemy hands. Those manning the post in Wojsławice, managed to withdraw towards Krasnystaw and join the police battalion in Chełm.

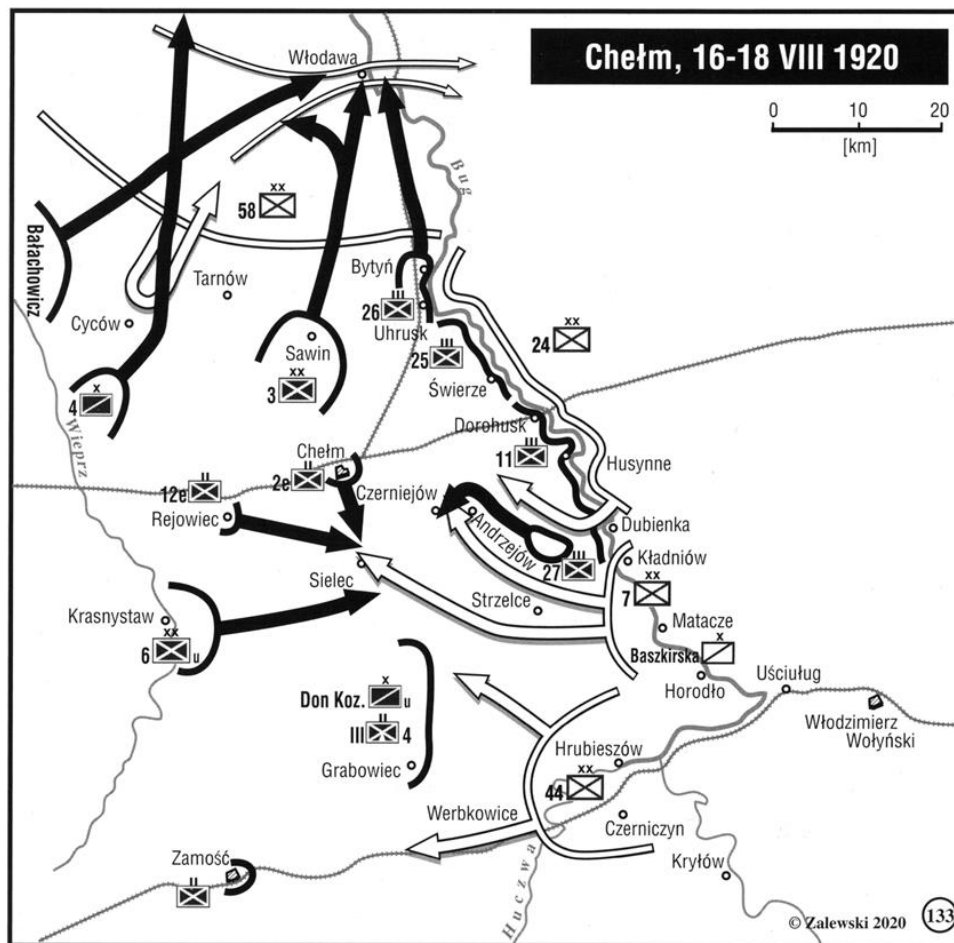
On 11 August, around 16:00, the Bolsheviks launched an attack on Chełm with the 223rd Rifle Regiment, preceded by shelling of the foreground and the railway station. Their troop movements were reported by the inhabitants of Serebryszcze and guards in an observation post on the bell tower on Chełm Mountain.¹

The 7th Division commander decided to carry out a counter-attack with his subordinate units. An excursion was made along the Chełm – Dorohusk railway line to reconnoitre the enemy's position. At the same time, by order of the 3rd Army, the 7th Division was given a task of carrying out an attack along that rail line, planned for 13 August. The Bug was to be reached on 14 August. The units of the 7th Division were to reach the Swierże – Dorohusk area and also occupy Uhrusk and Dubienka. At the same time, units of the 3rd Division were to enter Hrubieszów. The operations were partly related to the difficult situation in the northern part of the front, where Soviet formations were moving westwards towards Łęczna and Lubartów.

On 12 August, thanks to a radio interception, information was obtained that the Soviet 25th Rifle Division was to attack Chełm from the north and north-east the following day. On 14 August the Soviet High Command changed its 12th Army in its entirety from Aleksandr Egorov's South-Western Front and

¹ Góra Chełmska is a massive 70 metres above the level of the town!

subordinated to the North-Western Front. Tukhachevskiy also gained Semyon Budënný's 1st Horse Army. As a result of these decisions, the Lublin area became the left wing of the Soviet North-Western Front. The 12th Army was given the task of capturing Chełm and then, advancing on Kraśnik, to capture the Vistula crossings. However, the formation was unable to carry out this (several weeks late) order.



In view of the acquisition of the radio messages, an attack on the Soviet positions was planned. Launched at 03:00, the 14th Brigade's assault brought success to the Polish side, thanks to surprise, smashing the Soviet 222nd, 223rd, 224th and 225th Regiments. The Bolsheviks retreated in panic beyond the Bug River, which the units of the 14th Brigade reached in the afternoon of 13 August. At the same time the Ukrainian 6th Division succeeded in driving back the enemy several kilometres to the east, and the 13th Brigade, after repulsing several attacks on Sawin, counter-attacked in the afternoon, resulting in the fully driving back the Soviet 173rd Brigade. In the evening the units of the 13th Brigade reached the Bug in the Uhrusk area. The 3rd Division was equally effective: on 13 August it recaptured Hrubieszów from the Bolsheviks, and then, after leaving a Don Cossacks brigade and the 3rd Battalion of the 4th Podhale Rifle Regiment in the city, headed for the Białopole – Klesztów – Dubienka area.

However, successful Polish operations in the area from Wola Uhruska to Dorohusk did not mean that the Bolsheviks were driven out of the entire area around Chełm. On the following day, units of the 3rd Division fought a battle with the Soviet 172nd Brigade retreating to Włodawa, smashing it and taking over 700 prisoners.

The Bolshevik capture of Radzymin on 14 August caused the Commander-in-Chief to push forward the date of the counter-offensive from the Wieprz River by one day, ordering the attack to begin on 16 August. Some of the 3rd Army units were given offensive tasks (the 1st Division). The 3rd Division, on the other hand, was to clear the western bank of the Bug of units of the Soviet 58th Division.

An order from the Central Front, issued on 14 August, specified new tasks for the 3rd Army and new concentration areas. The 1st Division was to occupy the region of Ostrow Lubelski – Koleczowice and Starokomarówka – Piaseczno. Its task was to capture Parczew and move towards Biała Podlaska. The 3rd

Division was to occupy the Sawin – Chełm area and was tasked with attacking Włodawa and possibly Wisznice or Sławatycze. The 7th Division was to defend the Bug line and cover the actions of the other divisions, only the 13th Brigade was directed to support the attack on Włodawa.

In the order General Szubert's units (the division's HQ was still stationed in Chełm) were given the task of continuing the defence of the Chełm area from Włodawa to Hrubieszów. Resistance points were to be established at Włodawa, Uhrusk, Świerże, the bridgehead of Dorohusk, Husynne, Dubienka, Uściług and Hrubieszów. In addition to the regular Polish formations, the stage units and a Don Cossack brigade were to participate.

In addition the Central Front commander, General Rydz-Śmigły, by an order of 15 August, subordinated the 3rd Army to the Lublin General District Command, along with guard units, town garrisons in the front line zone and volunteer units.

In line with these directions, the Polish formations went into action on 16 August. The 7th Legion Infantry Regiment (3rd Division) set off in the direction of Włodawa, which it occupied at 24:00. The 13th Brigade, on the other hand, only reached Zbereże, but did take 100 prisoners. A day later, the 3rd and 7th Lancer Regiments pushed the Mozyr Group units out of Sosnowica. The north-eastern sector of the defence was thus secured. However, the situation in the southern part of the front became complicated, as the Bolsheviks proceeded to make renewed attempts to capture Hrubieszów and pave their way westwards.

To some extent, these actions were due to the interception of Polish operational orders concerning the counter-offensive from above the Wieprz River. The orders had been on Major Waclaw Drojowski, commander of the Stefan Batory Volhynian Volunteer Battalion, who was killed on 14 August during the Bolshevik attack on Dubienka (his adjutant was taken prisoner). The situation in the Dubienka area was finally brought under control by formations of the 27th Infantry Regiment. The Soviet command ultimately disregarded the Polish plans for a counter-offensive from the Wieprz, considering them unrealistic.

However, assuming that the Chełm region would remain undefended, the 1st Horse Army was directed towards Zamość – Lublin, while the 12th Army was given the task of moving into the rear of the Polish manoeuvre group in the Hrubieszów area. An attack was also launched on the Podhale battalion in Hrubieszów on 14 August, leading to its expulsion from the town. To the west, the Don brigade also had to withdraw from the Nieledeu region, outflanked in front of Hrubieszów. After capturing Hrubieszów, the Soviet troops moved towards Krasnystaw. This was to open the way to the north for the Horse Army.

In order to reinforce the Polish forces, the 2nd Legion Infantry Division was sent from the 2nd Army to the combat area, and on 16 August it was in Biskupice, east of Lublin. On that day, General Zieliński ordered the 7th Division to recapture Hrubieszów with one brigade. General Szubert formed an advance group under the command of Colonel Józef Olszyna-Wilczyński, of the 27th Infantry Regiment, a battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment, a stage battalion and three batteries of the 13th Heavy Artillery Regiment. The formations were to begin at dawn on 18 August.

On 19 August, the Polish units were preparing for two simultaneous actions, the aim of which was the capture of Hrubieszów by the 2nd Division (it was to launch a strike from the Grabowiec – Wojstawice – Alojzów – Sielce area) and the defeating of the large Bolshevik forces gathered in the Andrzejów area. The latter task was assigned to Captain Szwarzenberg-Czerny and Colonel Olszyna-Wilczyński's units of the 7th Division. The 2nd Division did not manage to accomplish its task, mainly due to difficulties in regrouping (it was following on foot marches from Krasnystaw), while the units under General Szubert, in the evening of August 19, pushed the enemy out of Andrzejów, who withdrew to Dubienka. On the following day, Colonel Olszyna-Wilczyński's group pushed the units of the Soviet 73rd Brigade beyond the Bug in the Husynne – Dubienka sector, finally eliminating the threat of seizing Chełm.

On 21 August General Szubert ordered subordinate defensive positions, in line with General Zieliński's order for an active defence of the Bug River with secondary units and the creation of a strong shock group, concentrated in the Chełm area, with the task of striking in any direction should the need arise. The police battalion was also withdrawn from the 7th Division and returned to previous tasks.

In the following days (until 26 August), the 7th Division was not attacked by Soviet units, but there were constant clashes with remnant Bolsheviks on the western side of the Bug and with cavalry making advances from the eastern side of the river.

The final phase of fighting began on 27 August with artillery shelling the Dorohusk – Swierże sector. Then units of the Soviet 7th Rifle Division advanced on Dubienka, which was defended by the 11th Infantry Regiment (2nd Division). This action was part of an offensive operation undertaken by the 12th Army and the Horse Army to break through the defences on the Bug and advance into the rear of the Polish armies. With the attack on Dubienka, units of the 12th Army began offensive operations along the entire length of the Bug, but their attempts to break through Polish resistance failed.

On 28 August General Zieliński ordered his subordinate units, while maintaining defensive positions, to prepare the troops for offensive action on the eastern side of the Bug. The order was issued despite the fact that Budëny's Horse Army had begun offensive operations towards Tyszowce on 27 August. It was not changed even when the 2nd Division surrendered Hrubieszów and was forced to withdraw to the area of Kulakowice – Janki – Trzeszczany.

Hostilities in the Chełm region over the next few days continued only in the sector from Dubienka to Horodło. The Bolsheviks made constant attempts to breach the Polish defence, but both their good conduct and the deterioration of weather conditions weakened their ability to operate. The Polish side took advantage of this, conducting an active defence all the time, effectively harassing the already weak enemy forces.

The defeat of the Horse Army at Komarów on 31 August meant the failure of the whole plan to get into the Polish rear, especially as the Soviet 12th Army was still unable to force its way across the Bug. Consequently, an offensive was launched, consisting of crossing the Bug and launching a counter-offensive across the entire 3rd Army. This occurred on 11 September at 05:00 in the general direction of Kowel – Lutsk.

The hostilities conducted in August 1920 in the Chełm area, having at times a rather intense character, played a significant role in the final victory in the Battle of Warsaw. The holding of the positions along the Bug and Wieprz was instrumental in making it possible to carry out an effective counter-attack against the Soviet Western Front. The 3rd Army formations showed great commitment and heroism, despite the months of retreating they had faced.

The Polish policemen also made their mark in the battle.

An important role was also played by the commanders, especially General Zieliński, whose experience allowed for effective operations (he was a retired colonel in the Austrian Army and former commander of the 3rd Legion Brigade and the Polish Corps). This was appreciated by Józef Piłsudski with the words:

I cannot omit the great strength of will, decision, calmness – especially deserving of distinction in view of the general tension – with which General Zieliński distinguished himself in this battle, covering with extremely small forces the flank and rear of the counterattack group I was commanding.

Numerous graves and memorials of Polish soldiers remain in the Chełm region from the battles in 1920, including in cemeteries in Chełm, Dorohusk, Uhrusk, Sosnowica and Dubienka, which to this day are an important testimony of devotion to the homeland and independence.

Bibliography

1. Biechoński J., W dziesiątą rocznicę zwycięstwa nad Rosją sowiecką, „Na Posterunku” 1938, nr 38.
2. Borowiec S., Walki o Chełm (fragmenty książki: Nad Bugiem walki ostonowe 7 Dywizji Piechoty, Warszawa 1925 r.), oprac. J. Ziemiński, „Chełmskie Prace Historyczne” 1995, t. 2, cz. 1.
3. Chełm w lipcu 1920 r. – raporty starosty, oprac. J. Ziemiński, „Chełmskie Zeszyty Historyczne”, Chełm 1993.
4. Kartki z wojny 1920 r.(3): [J. Kotlarewicz], Raport sprawozdawczy z działalności policji za czas od 1-21 sierpnia 1920 r., oprac. J. Lewandowski, „Przegląd Kresowy” 1990, nr 18.
5. Lewandowski L., Lubelszczyzna w czasie wojny 1920 roku, „Nowe Relacje” 1990, nr 60.
6. Litwiński R., Policja państwowa województwa lubelskiego w czasie wojny polsko- radzieckiej 1920 roku, „Rocznik Chełmski” 1996, t. 2, s. 207–228
7. Sioma M., Działania wojenne na Chełmszczyźnie w okresie bitwy warszawskiej, „Rocznik Chełmski” 2002, t. 8, s. 193–217.
8. Sioma M., Społeczne konsekwencje najazdu Armii Czerwonej w 1920 roku na Lubelszczyznę, „Rocznik Chełmski” 2007, t. 11, s. 111–128.
9. Woyno J., Walki ostonowe pod Chełmem w czasie wojny polsko-bolszewickiej (5 sierpnia – 9 września 1920), „Pro Patria” 2001, nr 2, s. 18–19.
10. Wyszczelski L., Operacja warszawska sierpień 1920, Warszawa 2005.
11. Zakrzewski M., Honor oficera. Zapomniane dzieje generała Zygmunta Zielińskiego, „Dziennik Polski” 2017, nr 276, dod. Historia.