

■ The Wielkopolska Uprising of 1918/1919

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The successful Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) Uprising of December 27, 1918-February 16, 1919) went down in history as one of the most consequential events of the early 20th century when it comes to impact on Poland. The insurgency was the first armed effort to forge the borders of the re-emerging Polish state. Next to the three Silesian Uprisings and the imposition of terms on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, these bloody battles shaped Polish-German relations of the interwar period.

The defeat of the Central Powers in the Great War, the collapse of Austria-Hungary, the fall of the Empire and the German revolution opened up new opportunities for Poles. At the beginning of November 1918, Polish territories remained in the hands of Germany and Austria-Hungary. As the Germans laid no claims to the parts of the Russian Partition they were occupying (which they promised to revert to Poles in the Act of November 5, 1916), the retreat of German troops from these areas proceeded smoothly with only a few upsets, such as the Międzyrzecz Podlaski massacre. The western part of the Austrian Partition also fell under Polish control, with claims to Lviv and Eastern Galicia being made by the Ukrainians. However, the land annexed by Prussia remained in the Reich, and the German authorities had no intention to relinquish it.

In November 1918, Polish independence campaigners became active throughout the Prussian Partition, particularly in the Poznań Province. By mid-November, power in Poznań was divided three ways among: a) the former civil and military authorities, brought under the control of the revolutionaries (councils), b) the Workers' and Soldiers' Council, headed by an executive committee (increasingly influenced by the Poles), and c) the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council (backed by the Supreme People's Council itself), acting as an executive branch of sorts that represented all Poles living in the Prussian Partition. By November 11, the Poles forced the German Mayor Ernst Georg Wilms to step down and surrender his post to Jarogniew Drwęski, a Pole. Poles played a central role in the forces tasked with maintaining law and order. A People's Guard was formed with the consent of the German authorities. Poles gained control of the Guard and Security Service (*Wach- und Sicherheitsdienst*), a force established to keep order in the military, formally under German command but, at the time, substantially influenced by members of the Polish Military Organization of the Prussian Partition headed by Mieczysław Paluch). The Germans, on their part, created *Heimatschutz-Ost*: a voluntary force deployed in the Poznań Province to protect the local Germans. Swayed by opposition from the SPC Commissariat, the German authorities disbanded this force and replaced it with the *Grenzschutz* (Border Guard).



According to a 1910 census, the Poznań Province had a population of roughly 2.1 million, comprised of 1.29 million (61.4%) Poles whose declared Polish as their mother tongue, and 807,000 (38.4%) residents whose declared German as their mother tongue (including approx. 1.5% of Jews). Over 45% of the Germans lived in the Bydgoszcz district with less than 30% remaining in the Poznań area. Despite an extensive Germanisation and colonization effort targeted at the Poles, the Prussian authorities were unable to tip the population scales in favor of the Germans. With its sophisticated and well-developed agriculture, the Poznań Province was a strong pillar of the Reich's economy serving as its breadbasket. This feature gained particular significance towards the end of the war when the Germans faced enormous food shortages.

The day after the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann announced the establishment of the German republic on November 9, 1918 in Berlin, power in the Reich was seized by the revolutionary government, the so-called Council of the People's Deputies, which was led by Friedrich Ebert (SPD). The Council was composed of six deputies representing two social democratic parties: the SPD (the so-called majority social democrats) and the USPD (known as independent social democrats). Prussia (November 14) also saw power seized by a revolutionary government, supported by the SPD and USPD and led by Paul Hirsch. The new authorities established a dialogue with Polish representatives hoping to maintain peace and secure supplies for the Reich. To this end, Undersecretary of State in the Prussian Ministry of Internal Affairs Hellmut von Gerlach, who was known for his pacifist disposition, visited Poznań on November 19. The Poles negotiated significant concessions from Berlin, taking advantage of the domestic predicament of the Reich and its food supply difficulties. On behalf of the German authorities, Hellmut von Gerlach agreed to the convening of the Polish District Assembly in Poznań on the condition that the Assembly would not pass resolutions on being part of the Prussian partition, and that this issue would be left for the peace conference to resolve. In addition, the Central Committee of the Supreme People's Council sought to obstruct any premature attempts by the Poles to seize power, especially in the east of the Poznań Province (including the towns of Ostrów Wielkopolski and Jarocin).

On 3-5 December 1918, the District Parliament convened in Poznań (in a screening room of Apollo cinema). Over 1,100 delegates representing Poles living in the German Reich took part in the session. A huge patriotic gathering accompanied the delegates on their way across Poznań. The District Assembly appointed new members of the Supreme People's Council, enlarged its Commissariat and recognized the Polish National Committee in Paris, led by Roman Dmowski, as its representation among the Triple Entente countries (the National Democrats were the most influential group in the Prussian partition). The Polish actions raised serious concerns among the Germans. On December 12-13, a congress of German People's Councils (Volkstag) was held in Poznań in protest against the Polish aspirations for independence. It was accompanied by a mass demonstration by local Germans. Tensions in Poznań kept mounting.



The Polish National Committee weighed options of supporting Poles in the Prussian Partition where preparations for an insurgent uprising were under way. The Committee went as far as to float the idea of deploying the Blue Army of General Józef Haller in Gdańsk hoping it would spark an uprising across the entire Prussian Partition. The insurgency was expected to break out in January 1919, immediately before the Paris conference. Meanwhile, Ignacy Jan Paderewski was to visit Warsaw (by way of Gdańsk and Poznań), accompanied by the British delegation. One of his missions was to secure a settlement between the Polish National Committee and the Warsaw government.

Paderewski's arrival in Poznań on the evening of December 26, 1918 was met with an enthusiastic reception by the Poles. In a patriotic demonstration, 50,000 Poles took to the streets to welcome the maestro. Later that night, Paderewski delivered a patriotic speech from the balcony of Bazar hotel. The city was adorned with the flags of Poland and the Triple Entente countries. This provoked the Germans to hold a counter-demonstration on the following day that was joined by locally-stationed German soldiers. During its course, Polish and Triple Entente flags were taken down and multiple buildings (including the headquarters of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council) were plundered. Riots broke out, shots were fired. The People's Guard, the Guard and Security Service and the Polish Military of the Prussian Partition arrived at the scene promptly to secure the city center. The Poles swiftly took control of most strategic facilities in downtown Poznań. Only some German soldiers engaged in the fighting. Within two days, the Poles captured most of the city. Some German soldiers refused to engage with the Poles alongside whom they had recently fought in World War I. The fact that their wish was to simply return home facilitated the negotiations and helped minimize the loss of life. The final place of German resistance in Poznań to end up in Polish hands was the Ławica airport, which the Poles seized on January 6, 1919.

News of the uprising spread like wildfire in areas where local People's Guard and Guard and Security Service units launched operations. Within days, the insurgents took control of almost the entire central and south-eastern parts of the Poznań Province. Heavy fighting ensued in the west, north, north-east and south where the German *Grenzschutz* (Boarder Guard) put up strong resistance. In early January, after a few days of fighting, the insurgents captured Inowrocław. Bydgoszcz and the peripheries of the Poznań Province remained in the hands of the Germans.

The uprising took the German authorities completely by surprise. The timing could not have been worse for the Reich government. In the German capital, tensions had run high in the wake of a revolt of a naval brigade, deteriorating relations between the SPD and the USPD, and disruptions caused by the communists of the Spartacist League. Early on, the German authorities were unaware of just how serious things had become in and around Poznań. The Council of People's Delegates discussed the issue on December 28. While the SPD demanded an aggressive response against the Poles, the USPD favored negotiations. In the end, a joint delegation of the Reich and the Prussian government left for Poznań to assess the developments and start talks with the Poles. It included minister



without portfolio in the Prussian government Eugen Ernst, Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of War Paul Göhre and Captain Heinz Guderian. Before the delegation arrived in Poznań, a turning point was reached in the Council of People's Delegates on December 29 resulting in the resignations of USPD commissioners (on January 4, 1919, USPD members also left the Prussian government). On December 30, the said delegation met with the Supreme People's Council only to find that Poznań and the area around it were already in the hands of the insurgents.

Upon his return to Berlin, in an interview for *Telegraphen-Union*, Minister Ernst stated that scales in the Poznań Province tipped considerably in favor of the Poles, who gained the upper hand. It was therefore recommended that an agreement with the Polish side be sought as soon as possible. "Perhaps 14 days earlier, it would still have been possible, under certain conditions, to save the day for the Berlin government by military means and to retain its influence in Poznań. Today, it seems too late to launch any such attempts. (...) At any rate, there can be no doubt today that the city of Poznań as well as the eastern part of the Poznań Province are fully controlled by the Poles". His statement drew criticism from the German press and government officials alike. Under public pressure, the People's Delegates Council issued a call to arms seeking volunteers (for *Freikorps*) to fight the insurgents. Ads in the German press sought to recruit volunteers to join the newly-established *Freikorps*. However, the effort was delayed by a January 5-12, 1919 uprising of the communists in Berlin, which was brutally suppressed by the *Freikorps*. The communist riots in Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg indirectly contributed to the success of the Wielkopolska Uprising by delaying the German counter-offensive.

Although the majority of the Poznań Province ended up in the hands of the insurgents in January, it remained a part of the Reich in formal and legal terms. Its future was to be determined by a peace conference commenced on January 18, 1919 in Paris. That is why the Germans organized elections to the National Assembly (January 19) and the Prussian Constitutional Assembly (January 26) in the Province, which the Poles boycotted at the request of the Supreme People's Council. It proved impossible, however, to hold Polish Legislative Assembly elections in the Poznań Province on its scheduled date of January 26, 1919.

The first stage of the Wielkopolska Uprising (which lasted roughly until mid-January) was fully spontaneous. Much of the fighting was local in scope and uncoordinated across the region. On January 16, 1919, Gen. Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki stepped in for Maj. Stanisław Taczak to become new commander-in-chief of the uprising and to build a regular insurgent army, the so-called Army of Wielkopolska, which would report to the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. The ranks of insurgent troops swelled quickly. By mid-February, their numbers reached a staggering 30,000. Meanwhile, in late January and early February, the Germans launched a counter-offensive. On January 28, they advanced from Bydgoszcz towards Szubin. Battles ensued over the towns of Babimost and Kargowa on the western front and over Rawicz on the south. To better coordinate



military operations against the insurgents, the German authorities moved their Supreme Command HQ to Kołobrzeg.

As the Poles and the Germans battled it out fiercely in Wielkopolska, the victorious powers and the defeated Germany conferred in Trier (on February 14-16, 1919) to extend the armistice. At the request of Marshal Ferdinand Foch, a Polish-German demarcation line was drawn in hopes of putting an end to the hostilities. The line's location favored the Poles, who retained the majority of the Poznań Province (the German side included Bydgoszcz, which it had controlled all along, as well as Leszno, Rawicz and Babimost). The Germans protested against such a placement of the demarcation line. In his report on the Trier talks to the National Assembly, Matthias Erzberger emphasized that such decisions had been forced on the Germans by Marshal Foch's ultimatum. The armistice between the insurgent forces and Germany reached on February 16, 1919 has been commonly considered the end date of the Wielkopolska Uprising, although local clashes along some sections of the demarcation line continued throughout 1919.

On March 5, 1919, the National Assembly debated the state of affairs in the former Poznań Province. Alfred Hermann, Elise Ekke and other locally-elected deputies were particularly vociferous. They pointed to the plight of the "800 thousand Germans" who ended up on the Polish side of the demarcation line, emphasized the contribution to progress that the Germans had made in the province as well as the region's economic ties with Germany, and brought up the Fourteen Points of President Thomas Woodrow Wilson (which the Germans interpreted differently than the Poles). The Germans hoped that the peace treaty would sanction the return of this land - or at least a part of it - to the Reich. However, the terms imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles turned out to be considerably tougher. Poland was given Leszno, Rawicz and Kępno as well as Bydgoszcz, whose population was predominantly German. As a result, nearly the entire former Poznań Province was incorporated into Poland (although the Germans kept some largely Polish areas such as Babimojszczyzna and parts of the Złotów district).

The Wielkopolska Uprising was a success for the Poles. It was a crowning achievement of over 120 years of independence endeavors on the part of the Poles living in the Prussian Partition. Although the uprising broke out spontaneously, it had been meticulously prepared. What is important is that the insurgents managed to take advantage of the tight spot in which the German Reich found itself in the wake of its defeat in the war and the revolution, as well as other favorable circumstances (such as the so-called communist Spartacus uprising in Berlin), which delayed the German counteroffensive. Although the gains of the uprising were not automatically recognized in legal terms, the effort showed the delegates of the victorious powers who gathered in Paris that the majority of the inhabitants of the former Poznań Province wished to join Poland. The insurgents managed to achieve their key goals, although they failed to coordinate the Polish uprising across the entire Prussian Partition.



The Wielkopolska Uprising continues to be celebrated in the local patriotic tradition, as manifested in the numerous monuments, memorial plaques, and museums dedicated to its heroes. Local communities take great care to remember those events and their local heroes. The people of Wielkopolska take tremendous pride in this tradition.