



Jerzy Kossak's *Miracle at the Vistula*

ARTYKUŁ

Battle of Warsaw 1920

Author: **MIROSŁAW SZUMIŁO** 12.08.2020

The Battle of Warsaw was one of the most important moments of the Polish-Bolshevik war, one of the most decisive event in the history of Poland, Europe and the entire world. However, excluding Poland, this fact is almost completely unknown to the citizens of European countries.

It was noticed already in 1931 by a British diplomat, Lord Edgar Vincent d'Abernon, a direct witness of the events who, in his book "The eighteenth decisive battle in the history of the world", wrote: "The contemporary history of civilisation knows little events of more importance than the Battle of Warsaw in the year 1920. It also knows no other which was more overlooked."

To better understand the origin and importance of the battle of Warsaw, one needs to first present a short summary of the Polish-Bolshevik war and, first and foremost, to describe the goals of both fighting sides. First, we need to state the obvious that the Bolshevik regime, led by Vladimir Lenin, was set for expansion from the beginning. As a prolific American historian, prof. Richard Pipes stated: “the Bolsheviks took power not to change Russia, but to use it as a trampoline for world revolution”.



Polish defences with a machine gun position near Miłosna, in the village of Janki, August 1920

The road to Europe opened up when Germany lost the First World War and signed the surrender on November 11th 1918. The German troops then systematically retreated from the occupied lands of Ukraine, Belarus and other Baltic states. They were immediately followed by the Bolshevik Red Army, fulfilling Lenin’s orders to begin its “freeing” march west. This operation had a telling codename - “Vistula”. The most important job of the Bolsheviks was to break through to Germany and Austria which were filled with revolutionary atmosphere. To do that, they needed to get rid of the “barrier”, meaning, as Joseph Stalin wrote, “the dwarf national states which wound up between the two huge sources of revolution in the East and West”.

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One such barrier was, first and foremost, Poland which just regained independence following the defeat of

Germany and the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. On November 17th 1918, at the Red Army briefing, its commander Leon Trotsky predicted the sovietisation of Poland and Ukraine as “the links binding Soviet Russia with future Soviet Germany” and the first stage in building “the Union of European Proletariat Republics”. Poles lived mainly at the territories of modern Belarus and Lithuania, which were invaded by the Bolsheviks. A Polish Self-defence was created there, counting 10 thousand men, which was part of the Polish Army and its commander, Gen. Władysław Wejtko followed the orders of Chief Commander Józef Piłsudski. Between the 3rd and 5th of January 1919, the self-defence units tried to defend Vilnius on their own. However, in the face of an overwhelming opponent Poles had to retreat from the city. Thus, the Polish-Bolshevik war actually began on January 3rd 1919, although not formally. The march West was accompanied by the creation of puppet Soviet republics: Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Ukrainian and Belarusan. A Western Marksmen Division, consisting of Polish communists, marched among the ranks of the Red Army. On January 8th 1919, the Soviet newspaper “Izvestia” announced the creation of the Revolutionary War Council of Poland, a cornerstone for the future communist government. Nonetheless, this date was not burned into the Polish identity as it was overshadowed by the other events of the year 1920.

Poles who fought for independence at the time imagined a reborn Polish state with borders similar to those the kingdom of Poland had before the partitions in 1772, including the Lithuanian, Belarusan and Ukrainian lands. Absolutely no one would ever imagine back then the current borders of Poland, set after the Second World War, without the great Polish cities in the east: Vilnius and Lviv. Meanwhile, contemporary national movements of Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians developed in the former Polish lands in the east. The Chief Commander of the Polish army and the Head of State, Józef Piłsudski was very well aware of that. Hence, he wanted to join their desire to be free with the idea of a strong Republic of Poland by offering them the creation of a federation.

“One of the most significant and least known battles in the turbulent 20th century history” – Roger Moorhouse on the centenary of the battle of Warsaw, 1920 (exclusive)

The main goal of Piłsudski was the rebuilding of a strong Poland, capable of surviving between Germany and Russia. To achieve that, it was necessary, according to him, to weaken Russia as much as possible by taking from it not only Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, but also Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Caucasus states. This way, a bloc of “Intermarium” states was to be created. In opposition to the federal concept of Piłsudski, there was the nationalistic concept of another Polish leader – Roman Dmowski, rejecting the multinational Republic of Poland for the ethnical “Poland for Poles”.

Under these circumstances, the clash between Poland and Bolshevik Russia was inevitable. Piłsudski had a serious problem on his hands, as the Polish state initially controlled a very small territory without the lands of the German occupation and the lands east of the Bug river. The Polish Army was only just being created and had to use most of its forces to fight with the Ukrainians for Lviv and Eastern Galicia. However, the Supreme Commander did not intend to just idly wait for the Bolsheviks to come to Warsaw. In February 1919, he launched a pre-emptive attack, entering the lands of western Belarus left by the Germans. Despite having relatively small forces and the superior numbers of the enemy, he showed great strategic skills. In April 1919, as a result of a successful offensive, Polish troops took the region of Vilnius, and in the summer of 1919 most of the Belarusian lands up to the line of the rivers Daugava and Berezina. The “Polish barrier” made it impossible for the Bolsheviks to come to the aid of the communist republics in Hungary and Bavaria.

One of the few people to understand the gravity of the situation was Pope Benedict XV, who wrote in a letter of 5 August: “Currently, not only Poland’s national existence is in danger, but also all of Europe is threatened with the atrocities of a new war”.

Piłsudski then made an address to the citizens of the old Great Lithuanian Duchy, promising them independence and self-proclamation. In reality, he intended to bind the reborn Great Lithuanian Duchy with Poland in a federation, divided into three parts: the Lithuanian one (with a capital in Kaunas), Polish one (Vilnius lands) and Belarusian one (with a capital in Minsk). Unfortunately, the Belarusians, with their weak national identity, were indifferent to this offer, while the Lithuanians, having their own state already, were definitely hostile to the idea.

These Polish successes in Belarus were only possible due to the fact that the Bolsheviks had to fight on several fronts, and their main opponent became the Russian White Army, led by gen. Anton Denikin. In the face of Denikin’s offensive, led from the south to Moscow, the Polish-Bolshevik front became a secondary front in the second half of 1919. Piłsudski then made a truce with the Bolsheviks, since he was not able to come to an understanding with the Russian White movement. General Denikin accepted independent Poland only west of the Bug river, did not acknowledge Ukraine’s independence and was not interested in any compromise. He was supported by the Entente countries: France and Great Britain. In this situation, Denikin’s victory would mean that Poland would be reduced to nothing but a small country, squished between huge Russia and Germany.

Opposed to the Bolshevik claims, and currently Russian propaganda, Józef Piłsudski was never a man filled with hatred towards Russia and the Russian people. He only understood that Russia, be it white or red, will always be an imperialistic state. However, the war with the Bolsheviks was not a Polish-Russian war. Piłsudski stressed in one of his orders: “We are not fighting the Russian nation, but the Bolshevik system”. Following Denikin’s defeat, he placed his bets on the democratic “third Russia”, initiating in January 1920 cooperation with Boris Savinkov – the leader of the socialist-revolutionary party, who established the Russian Political Committee in Warsaw. Under this agreement, small Russian units later joined the Polish side in the fight against the Bolsheviks.



**Infantry of the Polish Army
during Battle of Warsaw, August
1920**

Piłsudski’s ambitious plans regarding Russia can be divided into three stages:

1. Breaking of the “First Russia” (the white one) with the hands of the Bolsheviks,
2. Breaking of the “Second Russia” (the red one) by the Polish Army;
3. Creation of the “Third Russia” (a democratic one).

An important element of this plan was also a close alliance with the independent Ukrainian People’s Republic. The Head of State clearly saw the key importance of Ukraine for the future shape of this part of Europe. The road to this alliance, however, was long and complex due to the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Eastern Galicia. Only after it had ended, it was possible to begin talks. Finally, in 1919 the forces of the Ukrainian People’s Republic gave in to the overwhelming Bolshevik army and the Chief Ataman Symon Petliura took refuge in Poland. Lasting several months, the secret Polish-Ukrainian talks ended on April 21st 1920 with the signing of a political agreement in Warsaw between Poland and the Ukrainian People’s Republic. Symon Petliura, guided by political realism, waived his country’s claims to the lands of Eastern Galicia and western Volhynia. Poland in turn acknowledged Ukraine’s independence and promised to aid it in the fight against the Bolsheviks.

The so-called Kiev Offensive, undertaken by the Polish and Ukrainian forces in the spring of 1920, is to this

day presented by the Russian propaganda as the Polish aggression on Soviet Ukraine and “the third march of the Entente”. In reality, it was a preventive attack, similar to the Vilnius offensive from April 1919. The declarations of peace made by the Bolsheviks since December 1919 were nothing more than a smoke screen, calculated for a propaganda effect – fooling the public opinion of the world and weakening the readiness of the Polish Army. Meanwhile, preparations for the invasion of Poland were ongoing, a plan of offensive was ready and the Red Army mustered its troops near Smoleńsk.

Why did the Battle of Warsaw of 1920 determine the fate of the world? Mirosław Szumiło, D.Sc. from the IPN’s Historical Research Office talks about the significance of the Battle of Warsaw for the fate of Poland and the whole world. English subtitles are available (please choose this option in the Settings).

Piłsudski, thanks to the work of the Polish intelligence, knew that the Bolsheviks intend to strike at the northern front line – in Belarus. Nonetheless, he decided to first launch a preventive attack in the south – in Ukraine. Then, the allied Ukrainian army was to defend the taken positions, and the Polish forces would mostly be transferred to Belarus to deal with the northern Bolshevik troops. In a conversation with his assistant, the Polish leader said: “...the Bolsheviks need to be beaten and it needs to happen soon, so they wouldn’t grow in strength. We need to force them to engage in a decisive battle [...] Kiev, Ukraine, this is their weak spot. It is so for two reasons: first, Moscow will be in danger of starvation without Ukraine; second, if we threaten them with the formation of independent Ukraine, they will not be able to risk it and will be forced to meet us in battle”.

The offensive, started on April 25th 1920 by the allied Polish and Ukrainian forces, showed a lot of promise. A lot of prisoners and military equipment were seized. However, the Bolsheviks were not that easily fooled and retreated behind the Dnieper river, avoiding a decisive battle. On May 7th, the troops led by gen. Rydz-Śmigły captured the abandoned Kiev. On May 14th 1920, the Bolsheviks immediately began their offensive in Belarus, which was stopped, but on the cost of transferring Polish reserves there. Meanwhile, the 1st Bolshevik Cavalry Army of Semyon Budyonny was sent to fight in Ukraine. On June 5th 1920, it broke through the lines south of Kiev and ended up on the rear of the Polish army. Under these circumstances, gen. Rydz-Śmigły ordered a retreat from Kiev. The “Kiev Offensive” was a defeat.

Following the defeat in the Battle of Warsaw,

Lenin said: "We will conquer Poland anyway, when it is time. Against Poland, we can unite the entire Russian nation and even make an alliance with the Germans. [...] They want revenge and we want a revolution. For the moment, our interests are aligned". Nineteen years later, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed, and Stalin began his conquest of Europe. On 17 September 1939, he invaded Poland while it was defending itself against the Germans occupying half the country.

The main reason for the defeat, apart from the mistakes made by the Polish command, was the failure to form a strong army of the Ukrainian People's Republic. This army was not expanded due to many factors: a lack of trust from the Ukrainian population towards Poles, small number of volunteers, improper behaviour of some of the Polish soldiers in the freed Ukrainian territories, and first and foremost the lack of time to conduct wide mobilisation. The army only reached 20 thousand soldiers. Nonetheless, until the end of the war, it fought bravely against the Bolsheviks alongside the Polish Army. Hence, some historians call the 1920 war the Polish-Ukrainian-Bolshevik war.

Several attempts made by Poles to stop the large cavalry unit, which was the 1st Cavalry Army, were not successful. The Bolshevik Southwestern Front was forcing the Polish troops out of Ukraine. On July 4th 1920, the Western Front led by Mikhail Tukhachevski commenced a decisive attack in Belarus. Two days prior, he gave his famous order: "Soldiers of the workers' revolution - turn your eyes to the west. "The fate of world revolution is being decided in the west. Through the corpse of the White Poland lies the way to World Inferno. On bayonets we will carry happiness and peace to working humanity. To the west, to decisive battles, to great victories! Form your ranks, the hour of the offensive to Vilnius, Minsk, and Warsaw is here. Forward!".

The Polish Army was incapable of stopping the overwhelming enemy and was forced to retreat. On July 14th, the Bolsheviks took Vilnius. Polish troops were still retreating to the west, although they did not allow the Bolsheviks to surround them and break them up, retaining its combat value. In the face of the defeats on the front line, the Council of National Defence was established on July 1st, consisting of the Speaker of the Sejm, Prime Minister and representatives of the government, military and parliament. The Council had all the power regarding war and peace.

On July 3rd, the Council made a dramatic address to the nation: "As a unified, indomitable wall we must stand tall. The wave of Bolshevism has to break on the chest of the entire nation. [...] Therefore, we ask everyone

capable of carrying arms to volunteer and enlist for the army, showing that in Poland everyone is ready to lay down their blood and lives for the Homeland". The Catholic Church played an important role in mobilising the society. Polish bishops, in a letter to the faithful, stated that Bolshevism was the enemy of Christianity and culture in general, leaving behind nothing but death and destruction: "Truly, the spirit of the anti-Christ is its inspiration, its motivation for plunder and conquests". More than 100 thousand volunteered for the army, including 30 thousand citizens of Warsaw.

Even still, the army needed weapons and equipment, which forced the government to seek help abroad. British prime minister David Lloyd George, instead of aiding Poland, offered to mediate in peace talks with the Bolsheviks who demanded to set the border at the so-called Curzon Line (similar to the current eastern border of Poland), limit the Polish army to 50 thousand soldiers and practically give power to Polish communists. These conditions were absolutely unacceptable for the authorities in Warsaw. France behaved differently, offering deliveries of large amounts of weapons and ammunition. One of the few people to understand the seriousness of the situation was pope Benedict XV, who wrote in a letter from August 5th: "Currently, not only Poland's national existence is in danger, but also all of Europe is threatened with cruelties of a new war".



Polish-Soviet War. 1920

Aftermath of Battle of Warsaw.

Polish soldiers displaying captured Soviet battle flags after the Battle of Warsaw

Moscow, as part of a huge propaganda action under the slogan: "Hands off Soviet Russia", mobilised communist parties and leftist trade unions across all of Europe to work against Poland. Many western journalists were on the payroll of Bolshevik propaganda. Railway workers in Germany and Czechoslovakia blocked the aforementioned deliveries of military equipment to Poland. Governments of both of these states silently supported the Bolsheviks. The only safe way for this transports led through Romania.

On July 23rd 1920, the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee (Polrewkom) was created in Smoleńsk, led by Julian Marchlewski and Feliks Dzierżyński who later settled in Białystok, taken by the Bolsheviks. Revolutionary committees and red militias were established in the field, introducing new Soviet order. However, Polish workers and farmers did not yield to communist agitation. They gathered around the

Government of National Defence, created on July 24th. Farmer Wincenty Witos, the leader of the agricultural party, became its prime minister, while construction worker Ignacy Daszyński, the leader of the Polish Socialist Party, became its vice prime minister. Witos played an enormous role in mobilising the farmers, as the largest social class, to fight in the defence of the country.

The Red Army, due to political reasons, advanced in two different directions, which later became its demise. After all, Poland was only the starting point for attacking western and southern Europe. The Western Front of Mikhail Tukhachevski pushed in the western direction to Warsaw, with the intention of breaking through to Germany. In the meantime, the Southwestern Front led by Alexander Yegorov turned towards the southwest, to cross the Carpathian mountains after taking Lviv and Eastern Galicia. Yegorov's deputy, in the role of a political commissar of the front, was Joseph Stalin. On July 23rd 1920, Lenin sent a telegram to Stalin: "Zinoviev, Bukharin and I believe that we need to immediately begin a revolution in Italy. I personally think that in order to do that, we need to Sovietise Hungary, and perhaps Czechoslovakia and Romania as well".

If Lviv was captured by the Bolsheviks, Hungary would indeed be in real danger, since the president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Masaryk was ready to voluntarily give away the Subcarpathian Rus. Hungarian politicians were well aware of that fact. Hence, Hungary, humiliated by the partition treaty in Trianon, in this tragic moment for itself, decided to support Poland. The ammunition factory on the Csepel island was the only available source of ammunition deliveries for Austrian and German weapons, which was the equipment of half of the troops of the Polish Army.

Prime Minister Pál Teleki ordered to send all the stocks of ammunition and all production to Poland. In the face of the blockade introduced by Czechoslovakia, the transport reached Poland indirectly, through Romania. Several days before the final battle, 35 million rifle rounds and 30 thousand Mauser rifles reached Warsaw that way. On July 22nd 1920, Teleki appealed to all of Europe to support the fighting Poland. He also offered to send military reinforcements to Poland. On August 1st, the Hungarian army counting almost 100 thousand soldiers was put into combat readiness. However, the transport of the troops to Poland did not happen, since it required the green light from the Entente and Czechoslovakia or Romania. There was also an idea of creating a Hungarian Legion in Poland. In the end, only a small group of Hungarian volunteers managed to take part in the fight against the Bolsheviks, south of Lviv.

Tukhachevski intended to strike Warsaw from two sides – his main forces advanced on the capital of Poland from the east, while one of the Bolshevik armies was to flank Warsaw from the north, cross the Vistula river before Płock and attack the city from the west. The additional support in the fight for the Polish capital was to be Budyonny's 1st Cavalry Army, at the time attacking Lviv. Tukhachevski demanded for it to be transferred to Warsaw. However, the commanders of the Southwestern Front, Yegorov and Stalin, opposed that idea, as they wanted to take Lviv and quickly march to Hungary at all costs.

The fierce fighting at Lviv ended with the Bolsheviks' defeat, since they were unable to capture the city. This

region had huge strategic importance, since a railway connection to Romania went through Lviv, providing the option to deliver weapons and ammunition from Hungary and France. The railway line was also covered by the allied Ukrainian army led by gen. Mykhailo Omelianovych-Pavlenko, which defended the almost 150 kilometres-long part of the Dniester river.

A big gap was created between the troops of Tukhachevski attacking Warsaw, and Yegorov's forces attacking Lviv. Over a distance of 140 km between Vistula and Bug rivers, in the region north of Lublin, there were only weak Bolshevik units. Chief Commander Józef Piłsudski decided to use that and strike Tukhachevski's forces, advancing on Warsaw, from the south.

For the Polish plan to succeed, it was necessary to hold the area near the bridges to Warsaw, east from the Vistula river, until the troops were transferred and Piłsudski's offensive was launched. The toughest fighting took place in Radzymin and its surrounding parts (25 kilometres from the centre of the Polish capital). For three days, the city was passed from hand to hand, but the enemy's attack was pushed back in the end. One of the fights which became legendary was the one near Ossowo on August 14th, where a chaplain of the volunteers from Warsaw, priest Ignacy Skorupka died with a cross in his hand. Heavy fighting also took place north of Warsaw and in defence of the crossing at the Vistula river in Płock.

Lenin was urging his comrades. At the session of the Bolshevik Political Bureau on August 12th, he firmly stated: "From the political standpoint, it is of utmost importance to finish Poland off". However, it were Poles who destroyed the Red Army. The offensive between the Vistula and Bug rivers, led since August 16th 1920, forced Tukhachevski's army to retreat in panic. Only on the first day, Poles moved 45 kilometres up north. After 10 days, the enemy was crushed. In the Battle of Warsaw, the Red Army lost 25 thousand men killed in action and 66 thousand prisoners. Almost 50 thousand Bolsheviks, who had their escape cut off, took refuge in the German Eastern Prussia.

The Bolsheviks tried to regain initiative, but in September 1920 they were defeated once again near the Neman river. In the beginning of October the Polish Army, supported by the Ukrainian allies and small troops of Belarusians and Russians, approached the line which they had reached a year prior (before the Kiev offensive). They captured Minsk and were only 140 km away from Kiev. However, the tired society and politicians had enough of war and wanted peace. Lenin, for the time being, dropped his plans for conquering Europe, since he had to deal with the White Russians and farmers' revolutions across the entire country.

Hence, on October 18th 1920, a truce went into effect on the Polish-Bolshevik front.

The truce meant the end of the Polish-Ukrainian alliance. The Ukrainian troops, as well as Belarusians and Russians from Savinkov tried to continue their war against the Bolsheviks on their own, although they were overwhelmed by the enemy in a month. Based on the Polish-Soviet peace treaty in Riga, the lands of today's Belarus and Ukraine were divided. They were partly joined to Poland and mostly to the Soviet Union. Poland defended its independence, but Piłsudski could not realise his concept of a federation.

British diplomat Lord Edgar d'Abernon, who in the summer of 1920 stayed in Poland, called the Battle of

Warsaw the 18th most decisive battle in the history of the world (in chronological order). It was, in his opinion, an event of global importance, the clash of two different civilisations. In his book, d'Abernon reminded that it were Poles who first saved the western civilisation when king Jan III Sobieski defeated the Muslim Turks at Vienna in 1683, while at Warsaw in 1920, Poland saved Europe from "an even more revolutionary threat, meaning the fanatic tyranny of the Soviets".

Following the lost Battle of Warsaw, Lenin said: "We will conquer Poland anyway, when it is time. Against Poland, we can unite the entire Russian nation and even make an alliance with the Germans. [...] They want revenge, we want a revolution. For the moment, our interests are aligned". 19 years later, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was made, and Stalin began his conquest of Europe. On September 17th 1939, he invaded Poland while it was defending itself against the Germans, occupying half the country. Almost 22 thousand Polish citizens (Polish officers and representatives of the country's elites taken prisoners) were brutally murdered in the spring of 1940 in Katyń, Miednoje, Kharkiv, Bykownia and Kuropaty. The Katyń Massacre is often perceived as Stalin's revenge for the lost Battle of Warsaw.

In order to justify the Katyń Massacre, in its historical policy Russia created the "anti-Katyń". Poland is accused by Moscow of murdering Bolshevik prisoners captured during the 1920 war. In reality, between 16 to 18 thousand POWs died in Polish captivity. The main reason behind it, were the typhus and dysentery epidemics which also killed a lot of Polish civilians. At the same time, the Russians are omitting the fact, that nearly 15 thousand Polish prisoners never returned from Soviet captivity, that they were kept under horrible conditions, often dying of diseases, starvation and exhaustion from forced labour.

Between 1944-1945, Stalin conquered half of Europe, exporting the revolution with the tips of the bayonets and stopping only at the "iron curtain". However, thanks to the Battle of Warsaw, Poland and other countries of Central-Eastern Europe got the time to build their statehood and strengthen their national identities. After the Second World War, they were forced to succumb to Moscow, but they could not be joined to the Soviet Union entirely. Additionally, the countries of western Europe were saved from communism. The Battle of Warsaw was, therefore, the first defeat of the empire of evil, thanks to which the fate of the world was different than the one desired by Lenin. Shortly after the defeat near Warsaw, the leader of the Bolsheviks admitted: "The Polish war was the most important turning point, not only for the politics of Soviet Russian, but for global politics as well. [...] We could have had everything there, in Europe. But Piłsudski and his Poles caused a gigantic, unprecedented defeat for the cause of the global revolution".