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NORTHEASTERN MAZOVIA DURING THE WAR WITH BOLSHEVIK RUSSIA IN AUGUST 1920

MAZOWSZE PÓŁNOCNO-WSCHODNIE PODCZAS WOJNY Z BOLSZEWICKĄ ROSJĄ W SIERPNIU 1920 ROKU

In the recent history of Northeastern Mazovia, the events of the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik war take a special place.

In July 1920, military action against the Bolshevik Russia entered a decisive phase. On 4 July 1920, began a great offensive of the Western Front troops – commanded by Mikhail Tukhachevsky. The task of the Red Army was to break the Polish Army and create Soviet Polish Socialist Republic of Councils as a constituent part of the Soviet Union. Reborn after World War I, the Republic of Poland was to be liquidated as a major obstacle to bringing the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution to Western Europe, mainly to Germany.

The Soviet offensive seemed unstoppable. Both the Chief of State Józef Piłsudski and many Polish generals, i.a. Lucjan Żeligowski¹, were pessimistic about the situation on the front at that time.

In the summer of 1920, the inhabitants of Northeastern Mazovia faced the threat of Bolshevik troops entering. There was ominous news about the offensive of the Red Army and the constant retreat of the Polish troops. The landowners inhabiting Eastern borderlands, fleeing behind the Vistula, talked with terror about the Bolsheviks' cruelty.

When the news about establishing the Council of National Defence in the first half of July 1920 spread, county, urban and communal National Defence Committees or Committees of National Defence were formed, generally headed by starosts, mayors or voyts. The head of the county Committee of National Defence in Ostrołęka was the starost Adam Winiarski, and its other members included, among others, the mayor of Ostrołęka – Władysław Banach and Fr. Józef Gościcki.

¹ J. Piłsudski, *Pisma zbiorowe*, Vol. VII. Wyd. Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego w Warszawie, Warszawa 1937, p. 97; Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (AAN), Akta Generała Żeligowskiego, sygn. 15, k. 241.

These committees brought together representatives of all political parties except for the Communist Party of Poland².

The committees mentioned above established the following sections: financial, propaganda, soldier care and refugees' families care. For the sake of the Polish Army, officials and landowners taxed themselves, the latter also offered horses for the provision of voluntary cavalry regiments³.

The propaganda section distributed decrees, leaflets, announcements, posters of the Council of National Defence and the General Inspectorate of the Volunteer Army. In towns and villages the following slogans appeared: "Homeland in need!", "To arms! Your homeland calls you!", "Every threshold will be like a fortress to us!" On Sundays and fair days, rallies were held, usually ending with young men's vows and their declaration that they would join the Volunteer Army as soon as possible⁴.

The soldier care section prepared places for wounded Polish soldiers in houses and manors. In many towns inns were established, where food was provided free of charge or for a small fee to the soldiers. When masses of refugees from Eastern borderlands travelled through Northeastern Mazovia, they received the necessary assistance in the form of food, medicine and accommodation.

Clergy had a great influence on shaping the mood of the society. In order to overcome the depression caused by the news of the failure of Polish troops on the eastern front, a pastoral letter of 6 July, written by Polish bishops to the nation, was read from the pulpits in churches. During religious services and patriotic rallies, priests encouraged to join the Volunteer Army, condemned cowardice and hiding deserters⁵.

² Broadly on this subject J. Szczepański, *Wojna 1920 r. na Mazowszu i Podlasiu*. Wyd. Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych w Warszawie, Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna w Pułtusk, Warszawa–Pułtusk 1995, pp. 58–64; Idem, *Wojna 1920 r. w Ostrołęckiem*. Wyd. Urząd ds. Kombatantów i Osób Represjonowanych, Ostrołęckie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna w Pułtusk, Warszawa–Ostrołęka–Pułtusk 1997, p. 25.

³ Ibidem; Kurier Warszawski 1920, No. 212, p. 3; J. Szczepański, *Ziemiaństwo polskie wobec bolszewickiego najazdu 1920 r.*, [In:] *O polskich elitach raz jeszcze*. Eds. T. Epsztein, S. Górzyński, A. Karpiński. Wyd. DiG, Warszawa 2007, pp. 171–190.

⁴ H. Lisiak, *Propaganda obronna w Polsce w rozstrzygającym okresie wojny polsko-sowieckiej 1920 r.* Dzieje Najnowsze 1997, No. 4, pp. 4–22; J. Szczepański, *Spoleczeństwo Polski w walce z najazdem bolszewickim 1920 r.* Wyd. Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych w Warszawie, Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna w Pułtusk, Warszawa–Pułtusk 2000, pp. 182–190.

⁵ J. Szczepański, *Duchowieństwo diecezji plockiej w obliczu bolszewickiego najazdu 1920 r.*, [In:] *Kościół i kultura*. Eds. ks. R. Jaworski and A. Koseski, Wyd. Wyższe Seminarium Duchowne w Płocku, Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna w Pułtusk, Płock–Pułtusk 1996, pp. 87–89.

Scouts from many towns and high school students, i.a. from Łomża, Pułtusk, Wyszaków, responded most quickly to the appeal of the Council of National Defence. Having been trained, often together with their teachers, they were directed to the first front line⁶.

One of the guarantees of resisting the Bolshevik invasion was the massive influx of peasants to the army. Most of them, however, were embittered by the lack of solutions serving the interests of the Polish countryside. It was possible to gain the peasants' side and make them fight with the invaders through implementing the Agricultural Reform Act of 15 July 1920 and appointing the Government of National Defence headed by PSL-Piast (the Polish Peasant Party) leader – Wincenty Witos.⁷

Communists and agricultural workers prone to Bolshevik propaganda were waiting for the final defeat of the Polish Army and the occupation of Warsaw by the Red Army. In their opinion, the “bourgeois homeland” was not their homeland; they called it “the stepmother of the people”. Communists opposed the enlistment to the Polish Army, encouraged desertion. They distributed anti-war manifestos among the civilian population, ripped up mobilization and anti-Bolshevik posters⁸.

Also the Jewish poor people linked their hope for improving their fate with the Bolshevik governance. Even the wealthy Jewish youth, fleeing the enlistment to the Polish Army, were impressed with the principles of the new social system. However, the commonalty of the wealthy Jews, in fear of losing their property, massively supported all the activities of the Council of National Defence. Also the Jewish orthodox community supported the Polish government, fearing the atheization of public life in a country overrun by bolshevism⁹.

On 27 July 1920, the troops of the Red Army took the fortress of Osowiec without a fight, and on the next day – Białystok. The Polish army was unable to make any manoeuvres to stop the enemy offensive. The main reason for this was the rapid action of the 3rd Cavalry Corps commanded by Gai Bzhishkyan. He operated in the lane between the Narew river and the border with East Prussia,

⁶ J. Szczepański, *Harcerstwo polskie w wojnie polsko-bolszewickiej 1920 r.* Harcerstwo 1993, No. 7–8, pp. 3–31; Idem, *Młodzież szkolna w Polsce wobec najazdu bolszewickiego 1920 r.*, [In:] *Historia. Społeczeństwo. Wychowanie*. Ed. K. Bartnicka. Wyd. Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna w Pułtusku, Pułtusk–Warszawa 2004, pp. 359–367.

⁷ W. Oleksiewicz, *Chłopi i ruch ludowy w obronie niepodległości Polski w 1920 roku*. Roczniki Dziejów Ruchu Ludowego (Warszawa) 1992, No. 27, pp. 25–26; W. Stankiewicz, *Konflikty społeczne na wsi polskiej 1918–1920*. Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1963, pp. 319–320.

⁸ J.A. Reguła, *Historia Komunistycznej Partii Polski w świetle faktów i dokumentów*. Wyd. Portal, Toruń 1994, pp. 34–38; T. Wawrzyński, *Komunistyczna Partia Robotnicza Polski w wojsku w latach 1918–1920*. Teki Archiwalne (Warszawa) 1970, Vol. XII, pp. 33–34.

⁹ J. Szczepański, *Społeczność żydowska Mazowsza w XIX–XX wieku*. Wyd. Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztorza w Pułtusku, Pułtusk 2005, pp. 236–237.

continually flanking our troops from the north¹⁰. The lack of adequately large cavalry units on the Polish side facilitated the actions of Gai's corps.

The Polish High Command, preparing for the defence of Warsaw, planned to stop the retreat of their own troops. They were supposed to join the defence of Grajewo-Ostrołęka – the Bug river line. A crucial importance in the plans of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces played the fortress of Brześć where a defensive battle with Tukhachevsky's army was to take place. In the area of Brześć there was to be located the main military reserve of the Polish army. Another one, much smaller, was to be located in the vicinity of Ostrołęka¹¹.

In order to actively defend the territories of Northeastern Mazovia along the Przasnysz – Ostrołęka – Łomża – Ostrów line, by order of the Polish High Command No. 8069 / III of 30 July 1920, a special Operations Group under the command of General Jan Wroczyński was established¹². It was to include:

- a group under the command of Lt. Col. Andrzej Kopa defending Łomża
- a group under the command of Col. Władysław Obuch-Woszczatyński, operating along the border with East Prussia,
- 8th Cavalry Reserve Brigade consisting of three regiments: 2nd, 108th and 115th, regiment of uhlans and two cavalry batteries,
- 205th volunteer infantry regiment under the command of Major Bernard Mond.

When the Polish troops failed to maintain the fortress of Brześć, from where there was supposed to be a counterstrike, the General Staff of the Polish Army began to work on a new concept of fighting a major battle with the Red Army. The task of Polish troops retreating through the area of Northeastern Mazovia was to delay Tukhachevsky's army's march. He intended to repeat the manoeuvre of the commander-in-chief of the tsarist army used during the November Uprising, cross the Vistula between Wyszogród and Włocławek, and then attack Warsaw from the west.

The success of the bold plan for the decisive battle, later called the Battle of Warsaw, largely depended on the longest possible containment of the Soviet offensive near Łomża, Ostrołęka, Różan and Pułtusk, using the natural defensive line of the Narew river.

An important role in the Battle of Warsaw was played by the newly formed 5th Army commanded by General Sikorski¹³. The troops defending the above mentioned towns by the Narew river, gave a chance to the divisions and regiments

¹⁰ Broadly on this subject S. Żukowski, *Działania 3 Konnego Korpusu Gaja*. Wyd. Główna Księgarnia Wojskowa, Warszawa 1934.

¹¹ L. Wyszczelski, *Warszawa 1920*. Wyd. Bellona, Warszawa 1995, p. 32.

¹² Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe (CAW), Oddział I Mobilizacyjno-Organizacyjny I.300.7, sign. 108, No. 13484.

¹³ Broadly on this subject: W. Sikorski, *Nad Wisłą i Wkrą, Studium z polsko-rosyjskiej wojny 1920 roku*. Wyd. Zakład im. Ossolińskich w Lwowie, Lwów 1928.

that were to join the 5th Army to move freely into the concentration area near the fortress of Modlin, and for at least a short break before the decisive battle. The strike of the 5th Army from the Wkra river was to relieve the forces of the 1st Army commanded by Gen. Latinik defending the Warsaw bridgehead, and, in effect, enable them also to participate in the counterstrike which the Chief Commander was supposed to lead from the Wieprz river¹⁴.

On 29 July 1920, began a five-day defence of Łomża, attacked by the 3rd Cavalry Corps commanded by Gai Bzhishkyan and 18th Rifle Division of the 4th Army of Sergeyev. The fortress was defended by the group commanded by Col. Kopa, consisting of about 2,000 soldiers (its core was 101th infantry regiment) with the support of 23th Lida infantry regiment and the inhabitants of Łomża. During the battle of Łomża, the Soviet 18th Rifle Division was split and lost nearly 5,000 soldiers, taken captive¹⁵.

On 31 July, Gai Bzhishkyan was ordered to withdraw from fighting over Łomża and attack Nowogród. This small town by the Narew river was defended by small cavalry troops commanded by Col. Władysław Obuch-Woszczatyński assisted by the Lida Infantry Regiment.

At the same time, the last preparations for the defence of Ostrołęka were underway. Its defensive advantages were strengthened by the Omulew and the Rozoga rivers flowing parallelly to the Narew river as well as a fort erected by the Russians at the end of the 19th century, called "Gen. J. Bem's Fort" during the period of the 2nd Polish Republic. The defence of Ostrołęka's fortifications from the northwestern side was also facilitated by the marshy areas of the Fort's forefield and the Orzyc and Omulew rivers¹⁶.

Ostrołęka's defence was entrusted to two battle groups. The first one was the 8th Cavalry Brigade, since 4 August commanded by Gen. Stefan Suszyński and later by Gen. Aleksander Karnicki. It had about 2,000 uhlans, 9 heavy machine guns and 8 guns¹⁷.

¹⁴ Broadly on this subject: P. Piotrowski, *Walka o miasta Mazowsza Północnego podczas wojny polsko-rosyjskiej 1920 roku*. Wyd. Nauka i Innowacje, Poznań 2014.

¹⁵ S. Raganowicz, *Krótki szkic historii obrony Łomży w roku 1920*, [In:] *Na otwarcie Domu Żołnierza i dziesięciolecie obrony Łomży 1920–1930*. Wyd. Komitet Budowy Domu Żołnierza w Łomży, Łomża 1930, pp. 24–25.

¹⁶ J. Ciałowicz, *Fortyfikacje na ziemiach polskich w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej*. Studia i Materiały do Historii Wojskowości 1966, Vol. XII, Part 1, p. 252. Built in 1914, the outer line ran 30 km from the centre of defence and the other line at a distance of 20 km near Ostrołęka.

¹⁷ CAW, Oddział I Mobilizacyjno-Organizacyjny I.300.7, sign. 107, No. 13182; Oddział I NDWP I.301.7, sign. 95, No. 9718/I; Dowództwo frontu północno-wschodniego, sign. 13, No. 686/IV; sign. 23, No. 1404/I; R. Juskiewicz, *Działania militarne na północnym Mazowszu i w korytarzu pomorskim 1920 rok*. Wyd. Stacja Naukowa im. Prof. Stanisława Herbsta w Mławie, Mława 2011, p. 92.

The second group to defend Ostrołęka was commanded by Col. Jerzy Ferek-Błęszyński. It consisted of: 205th volunteer infantry regiment, 4th Pomerania Infantry Regiment, 1st marine corps battalion, marching company 9 infantry regiment Legion, several squadrons of uhlans. The grouping had around 3,900 bayonets, 200 sabres, 30 heavy machine guns, 20 guns¹⁸.

On 30 July 1920, the soldiers of the 205th volunteer infantry regiment started to travel from Warsaw to Ostrołęka by rail. They were accommodated in the suburbs of Ostrołęka, in the barracks in Wojciechowice. Many of the volunteers learned to operate rifles only on their way to the front. It is worth mentioning, though, that a significant number of the soldiers from the second grouping, which was supposed to defend Ostrołęka, underwent combat training. They were from the General District Pomerania (Grupa Okręgu Generalnego Pomorze) under the command of Gen. Bolesław Roja¹⁹.

The 205th infantry regiment reached Ostrołęka the earliest. Immediately after arriving in the city, on 31 July 1920, the soldiers were ordered to march towards Łomża in order to support the defenders commanded by Lt. Col. Kopa. When they reached Miastkowo at dawn on 1 August, after a 20-kilometer march at night, they were attacked by Soviet cavalry. In panic, retreating to Ostrołęka, they suffered severe losses²⁰.

Poorly trained volunteers were not able to face Gai's charging cavalry. The soldiers' baptism of fire caused severe losses. Only the remains of this regiment managed to get to Ostrołęka. On the next day, about 800 soldiers were missing at the muster. During the escape they had been slaughtered or taken prisoner. The Bolsheviks were especially ruthless towards Polish officers and non-commissioned officers²¹.

The authors of the 205th infantry regiment's history claim that only "The remains got through to Ostrołęka. The rest were slaughtered or disappeared without a trace. The falling night, which stopped the enemy from fighting further, saved some of the soldiers from being killed. The decimated troops reached Ostrołęka before midnight"²².

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ J. Przybylski, *Marynarze w walce o niepodległość Polski 1918–1920*. Wyd. Bellona, Warszawa 1999, p. 74.

²⁰ B.S. Mond, J. Gintel, *Historia 205. Pułku Piechoty Ochotniczej im. Jana Kilińskiego*. Warszawa 1932, pp. 38–46, 226–227. A volunteer Stanisław Wyhowski, grandson of Stanisław Moniuszko, master of the Kingdom of Poland in cycling races died there, among others.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 53. G.D. Gaj, *Na Warszawę*. Moskwa–Leningrad 1928, p. 149.

²² B.S. Mond, J. Gintel, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

On 2 August 1920, in the evening, in view of the lack of the relief, Col. Kopa decided to leave Łomża. The evacuation took place at night, between 2 and 3 August along the last free way to Śniadowo²³.

The next town which stood in the way of the 4th Army under the command of Sergejev, quickly moving west, was Ostrołęka. A small troop of the 3rd Cavalry Corps commanded by Gai Bzhishkyan started to attack the town. It was directed to the position of the 1st Battalion of the 205th infantry regiment and easily deflected. On other sections of the defence of Ostrołęka, however, the Bolsheviks managed to break through the Polish defensive lines, i.a. near Nowa Wieś and Susk. Nonetheless, these villages were regained thanks to the marines' counterattack, for whom it was a true baptism of fire. Their attack led by Capt. Konstanty Jacynicz – the commander of a marine regiment, was a success, despite the enemy's strong artillery fire and machine guns²⁴.

However, the Polish High Command was not satisfied with the defence organization of "Ostrołęka" Group under command of Gen. Wroczyński. On the evening of 3 August 1920, he was dismissed for the "lack of initiative and unreasonable temperance"²⁵. By the order of the Polish High Command, General Bolesław Roja became the new commander of "Ostrołęka" Group. He was considered a brave commander, so it was assumed that he would defend Ostrołęka long enough²⁶.

Immediately after taking command of "Ostrołęka" group, Gen. Bolesław Roja ordered to read in front of his subordinate troops, starting from a platoon, order No. 1. Here are its excerpts: "Soldiers! We defend against the Muscovite invasion our native Polish land. Therefore I took the command over you. We want the most far-reaching reforms and changes, but we will carry them out ourselves. We do not want our home to be ruled by the Muscovite or the Prussian. Why didn't the Bolshevik-Muscovites, speaking of the fraternity of the peoples, stop on the Polish frontier, but continue to murder our Polish soldiers, that is mainly villagers and workers? [...] The Bolshevik-Muscovites betrayed the communist idea! Soldiers! We will defend ourselves hard and fight to the finish against every invasion. I salute you, Comrades in arms.

General Roja"²⁷.

²³ CAW, Relacje, sign. 400.906. Obrona Łomży od dn. 28 lipca do 2 sierpnia 1920 r., pp. 1–4.

²⁴ R. Dziewałtowski-Gintowt, K. Taube, *Zarys historii wojennej pułku morskiego*. Warszawa 1933, p. 33; J. Przybylski, op. cit., p. 89. Gen. Wroczyński wrote in the report of 3 August 1920: „On several occasions strong attacks on Ostrołęka from the north-east were deflected with losses on both sides. The town's bypass begun from the south was liquidated for the time being, with the help of the Marine Battalion that fights perfectly”.

²⁵ R. Juskiewicz, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ B.S. Mond, J. Gintel, op. cit., pp. 70–71.

Gen. Roja, who arrived at the section defended by the 1st Marine Regiment, ordered the marines to attack the village of Zabiele. The soldiers of the 205th voluntary infantry regiment also fought bravely, deflecting the enemy attacks, often proceeding to counterattacks. The 2nd uhlans regiment also often organized charges²⁸.

Despite the initial successes, the situation of the defenders of Ostrołęka was getting worse with each passing day. On 5 August 1920, the main forces of the 4th Soviet Army under Sergeyev approached. Gai Bzhishkyan's cavalry crossed the Narew river to bypass Ostrołęka, just as they did with Łomża a few days before. The enemy ring around Ostrołęka began to tighten. In this situation, Gen. Bolesław Roja ordered the evacuation of the town's inhabitants. He ordered to continue strengthening Ostrołęka's defensive lines and gather supplies and ammunition for two days of combat²⁹.

On the morning of 6 August 1920, Ostrołęka was attacked by: the 8th, 16th and 53rd Soviet divisions of the 4th Army under Sergeyev, heading west, towards the Vistula crossings. Ostrołęka's defenders not only maintained their positions, but also successfully counterattacked³⁰.

On the same day, in the evening, the Bolsheviks began a huge assault on the positions of the 205th infantry regiment. Major Mond's volunteers retreated towards the town, inflicting massive losses on enemy troops. The Russians stopped charging as night fell. It turned out that the Polish soldiers had already fired all the bullets. The expected delivery of ammunition did not arrive.³¹

On 6 August 1920, Gen. Bolesław Roja was summoned by the Polish High Command to Warsaw. Due to exhaustion, lack of ammunition and food supplies, he made the decision to retreat to Różan. Between 6 and 7 August 1920, at night, Ostrołęka's crew left the town, heading for Różan. The infantry of the 18th Rifle Division entered abandoned Ostrołęka only before noon on 7 August³².

The Polish troops were no longer able to defend the forts in Różan by the Narew river. At the night between 7 and 8 August 1920 after a full day of fighting, they were left by the soldier from the 101st infantry regiment when the Russians managed to cross the Narew river through the fords in the vicinity of Różan³³.

The attack of the Soviet troops from Białystok towards Warsaw was held off by the army groups commanded by Gen. Lucjan Żeligowski and Gen. Aleksander

²⁸ R. Dziewałtowski-Gintowt, K. Taube, op. cit., pp. 33–34.

²⁹ It turned out that some companies defending Ostrołęka did not even have 100 bullets per private.

³⁰ B.S. Mond, J. Gintel, op. cit., p. 73.

³¹ Ibidem, pp. 73–74.

³² P. Piotrowski, op. cit., pp. 105–106.

³³ A. Aksamitowski, *Militarna rola Narwi w kampaniach wojennych XX wieku*. Wyd. Akademia Obrony Narodowej w Warszawie, Warszawa 2006, pp. 248–249.

Osiński. Gen. Żeligowski's troops fought fierce battles in the area of Ostrów Mazowiecka and Wyszaków. They counterattacked near Długosiodło³⁴.

The last of the towns of Northeastern Mazovia which was supposed to delay the Soviet offensive was Pułtusk. On 10 August 1920, the Red Army troops took Wyszaków and launched an assault through the White Forest towards Pułtusk. The 17th infantry division under Col. Pick were to hold off the Bolshevik offensive in that region.

Pułtusk was to be defended against the attacks of the Red Army, which had previously taken Maków and Szelków, from the north by Gen. Antoni Baranowski's Group. On 9–10 August, it had about 6,200 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, with 52 heavy machine guns and 25 guns.

The divisions of the 15th Army and part of the 3rd Army under Tukhachevsky attacked Pułtusk. In total, they had about 30,000 bayonets and 1,000 sabres, over 800 machine guns and 150 guns.

On 10 August, Gen. Sikorski was in Pułtusk, appealing to soldiers to keep the town at all costs. The commander of the 5th Army wrote after years: "In Pułtusk, I reckoned, the situation was utterly catastrophic. Approximately 2,000 soldiers were struggling with the overwhelming Russian forces, trying to consolidate around Pułtusk a generally broken front. However, the Russian advantage was so great in Pułtusk that only thanks to the resilient resistance of our troops, the 15th and part of the 3rd Army that fought at that time in its area were moving forward relatively so slowly. [...]"³⁵.

On 10 August 1920, the 17th infantry division under Col. Pick, defending Pułtusk from the east, also fought hard. However, it was unable to support the Polish troops fighting on the other side of the Narew river holding off the Bolshevik attack from Maków's side. On 11 August 1920, in the afternoon, the troops of the 67th infantry regiment defending Pułtusk from the White Forest's side, were ordered to retreat to the right bank of the Narew river and destroy the bridge on the way leading to Wyszaków. At the same time, a group of troops under Gen. Baranowski, in fear of being surrounded, began to retreat from Pułtusk to the west. Following the orders of the Polish High Command, they went near Modlin fortress, where the concentration of the 5th Army under Gen. Sikorski was coming to an end³⁶.

Capturing Łomża, Ostrołęka, Różan and Pułtusk by the Red Army troops had negative consequences for the Polish side. It enabled the Soviet command to redeploy their troops and supplies to Mazovia and to operate in various directions. It created the possibility of taking control of the Warsaw–Gdańsk railway line,

³⁴ CAW, Dowództwo frontu północnego, sign. 24, No. 3526/III; Dowództwo 1. Armii 311.1, Sign. 54, No. 4074/III; L. Żeligowski, *Wojna w roku 1920. Wspomnienia i rozważania*. Wyd. Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej w Warszawie, Warszawa 1990, p. 72.

³⁵ W. Sikorski, op. cit., pp. 63–64.

³⁶ P. Piotrowski, op. cit., pp. 112–116.

which could have resulted in breaking supplies deliveries for the Polish troops by sea.

A relatively short but effective defence of the towns located by the Narew river, lasting several days, surprised the Soviet command, however. The Western Front's commander Mikhail Tukhachevsky, disgusted with the not very effective assault of the 4th Soviet Army soldiers on the fortifications of Ostrołęka, replaced Sergejev with Shuvayev as its commander.

Other consequences of the heroic defence of the towns located by the Narew river in the region of Northeastern Mazovia were equally important. It restored the faith of Polish soldiers in their own power, the ability to stop the Bolshevik invasion. It also influenced the change in the Western Front troops' groupings, attacking Warsaw. Mikhail Tukhachevsky, having encountered the unexpected and very strong resistance of the Polish forces in the region of the Bug and Narew rivers, believed that their main forces were between the Bug river and the border with East Prussia. He obtained the consent of the commander-in-chief of the Soviet army – Sergey Kamenev to direct three armies: the 4th, 15th and 3rd much more towards the north. Since then, those three Soviet armies remained on the right bank of the Bug river. The concentration of the majority of Tukhachevsky's forces in the Northern Mazovia substantially enabled and accelerated establishing Józef Piłsudski's Strike Group.

The fierce fighting by the Narew river, i.a. the defence of Łomża, Ostrołęka and Pułtusk made, it easier for the Polish troops to break away from the enemy. To sum up, they contributed to creating real conditions for the execution of the historic command given by Commander-in-Chief Józef Piłsudski on 6 August 1920. It was one of the important causes for the Polish victory in the Battle of Warsaw.

The socio-political consequence of the Red Army's entry into the Polish lands was the introduction of the Soviet system. The Red Army moving west, immediately after capturing the area, appointed county, town, communal or rural military revolutionary committees, so-called "rewkoms". They were subordinated to the Military Revolutionary Council of the army operating in the given area³⁷.

In the county and town revolutionary committees, apart from representatives of the Red Army, there were local Polish communists, residing until then in Russia. Out of these, the chairmen of the county "rewkoms" were recruited after transforming the military revolutionary committees into the civil revolutionary committees. In each of the occupied towns, the Jews were recruited for "rewkoms" as Bolsheviks had great confidence in them³⁸.

On the way of the Red Army troops marching through the right-bank Mazovia, also communal, rural and manor military revolutionary committees were

³⁷ J. Szczepański, *Budowa sowieckiego aparatu władzy w 1920 r. w Polsce*, [In:] *Rok 1920. Wojna i polityka*. Ed. M. Szumiło. Wyd. UMCS w Lublinie, Lublin 2011, pp. 49–66.

³⁸ *Ibidem*. For example, Zenon Styczyński, who had created the bases of communist rule in Siberia and the Urals, became the chairman of the rewkom in Ostrów.

established. It was the responsibility of “rewkoms” members to supply the Soviet troops with food.

In August 1920, in the area of four counties of Northeastern Mazovia: Ostrów, Ostrołęka, Pułtusk and Maków, through which the 15th Army troops passed, nearly 20 “rewkoms” of various levels were created³⁹.

Most “rewkoms”, even at the rural level, were subsidized by the command of particular Soviet armies, for example a county revolutionary committee in Ostrów Maz. received 500,000 rubles and “rewkoms” in Piski, Czerwin, Troszyn, Lubotyń, Rzekuń (Ostrołęka county) received 15,000 rubles each⁴⁰.

Establishing “rewkoms” was usually accompanied by rallies and agitational meetings. In Mazovian towns and villages occupied by the Red Army, the Manifesto of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee was distributed in large quantities. The Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee (Polrewkom), led by Julian Marchlewski, Feliks Dzierżyński, Feliks Kon, was established in the first days of August 1920 in Białystok.

The leaders of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee firmly believed in the victory of the Red Army and imminent transfer of their headquarters from Białystok to Warsaw, where they were to act as the government of the Soviet Polish Socialist Republic of Councils. When the Bolsheviks fought on the outskirts of Warsaw, on the evening of 15 August 1920, the members of Polrewkom, convinced of the final defeat of the Polish troops, arrived in Wyszaków in order to be able to enter the capital of Poland as soon as possible. They stayed in a parsonage of canon priest Wiktor Mieczkowski⁴¹.

Some villagers of Northeastern Mazovia, on the news about the Red Army troops entering, began to realize their dreams of cheap land acquisition. Manor servants showed the Bolsheviks the places where silver and valuables were buried and where horses and cattle were hidden. The servants also took an active role in robbing the manors⁴².

Peasants having their own farms were clearly reserved about the Soviet authorities’ promise to build a new just social order in Poland.

The Bolsheviks were especially hostile towards Mazovian landowners. If a landowner had not evacuated himself with his family or had not hidden in a peasant disguise, he was arrested and then sentenced to death. Despite the interventions and

³⁹ Rosyjskij Gosudarstwennyj Wojennyj Istoriceskij Archiw w Moskwie (RGWIA), f. 200, op. 2, d. 149, l. 14; d. 193, l. 73; J. Szczepański, *Wojna 1920 r. w Ostrołęckiem...*, pp. 79–81.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, d. 128, l. 82; d. 193, l. 74. “Rewkoms” Department of the 15th Army had 3.5 mln rubles at their disposal.

⁴¹ W. Mieczkowski, *Bolszewicy w polskiej plebanii*. Wyd. Księgarnia W. Wędołowskiej w Wyszakowie, Wyszaków 1921, pp. 29–33.

⁴² *Rola członków Związku Zawodowego Robotników Rolnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej podczas najazdu bolszewickiego*. Wyd. Związek Ziemiaków w Warszawie, Warszawa 1921.

requests of manor servants, the Bolsheviks sentenced to death Feliks and Hieronim Ostrowski - the owners of Komorowo near Ostrów⁴³.

Despite the danger, the vast majority of priests remained in parishes to bolster their congregation's spirits. After the Red Army entered, the clergy were robbed everywhere. Priests were persecuted by the Bolsheviks who derided their faith and did not spare churches and holy places. Priests were often called upon interrogations due to "supporting counter-revolution". In Łomża, Bishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski was arrested and sent to prison⁴⁴.

The Bolsheviks murdered Fr. Stanisław Pędzich – the rector of the former bernardine church in Ostrołęka. They slaughtered i.a. Fr. Stanisław Szulborski – a parish priest of Wyszyny and Fr. Marcei Grzegorzczak – a vicar from Rzekuń⁴⁵.

Among the people kidnapped by the Bolsheviks from Różan died, among others, Piotr Zygunt – the mayor of Różan and a local teacher Jerzy Bałtusiś, the chairman of the town's National Defence Committee⁴⁶.

The news of the victorious counter-offensive of the Polish army caused an immediate change in the mood of Polish society. The change of attitude was apparent even among those villagers who had so far sympathized with socialism and had expected the arrival of the Red Army troops to bring them power and prosperity. Mass requisitions done by the retreating Bolsheviks, "scorched-earth" tactics used by the enemy, were met with the widespread desperate resistance of the peasants⁴⁷.

During the retreat of the Red Army, Mazovian peasants and workers having contact with the occupational but revolutionary order, grabbed their weapons. They defended the property massively robbed by the retreating enemy troops. In many places in Northeastern Mazovia, the units of Civic Guard prevented the destruction of the bridges⁴⁸.

The most partisan units were formed in the Kurpie region. In the northern part of Ostrołęka county, the Bolsheviks were attacked by a partisan unit under the command of Chorążewicz, a forester from near Kadzidło. His greatest success was

⁴³ Kurier Płocki 1920, No. 242, p. 1; Mr. Rutkowski stayed in the manor of Buczyn in Ostrołęka county, having given away all his livestock and equipment to hired stablemen and peasants living nearby, *Rola członków Związku Zawodowych...*, pp. 17–18.

⁴⁴ J. Szczepański, *Duchowieństwo Diecezji Płockiej...*, pp. 90–91.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 92–93.

⁴⁶ Archiwum Państwowe w Pułtusku (APP), Starostwo Powiatowe w Makowie Maz. (SPM), sign. 2, k. 167; sign. 15, k. 11.

⁴⁷ The change in the mood of Polish society was accurately appraised in the report of one of the employees of the Starosty office in Maków: "Suffered harm, robberies, murders, system of ruthless conduct, general disorganization of life have caused that small farmers are definitely hostile towards the Bolsheviks' intentions and actions", APP, SPM, sign. 15, b. p.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

taking captive 300 Bolsheviks, taking from them 12 machine guns and about 500 horses, and then handing them over to the Polish army⁴⁹.

The unit commanded by Piotr Rybacki from the commune of Turośl disarmed smaller Soviet troops and thwarted their escape to East Prussia. The Kurpian troops bravely fought against the retreating 3rd Cavalry Corps near Leman and Kolno. Many Kurpian partisans were killed with sabres by Gai's determined cavalymen⁵⁰.

The fast-moving Polish forces were unable to deal with smaller enemy units hiding in the forests. The ones who dealt with them were "peasants and youngsters, and even women, armed with forks and scythes [...] There are often fights in which villagers risk their lives"⁵¹.

The inhabitants of towns, i.a. Ostrołęka, gave examples of patriotism. On the evening of 21 August 1920, railwaymen from Kaczyny, a railway station located 4km from Ostrołęka, grabbed their weapons and did not allow a large Bolshevik unit to use the railway line to retreat. A startled Soviet commander retreated from Ostrołęka and cannonaded the railway station from field guns.

On 23 August, in the morning, the Bolsheviks staying temporarily in Ostrołęka were attacked by a unit consisting of Ostrołęka townsmen, commanded by a bricklayer Zygmunt Wojna. Escaping from Ostrołęka, they attempted to completely burn the bridge on the Narew river. The civilians and volunteer fire brigade set about putting out the fire. The military action of Zygmunt Wojna was supported by a small unit of the Polish Army. The bridge was saved. A lot of weapons were captured. Meanwhile, groups of Soviet soldiers began to approach Ostrołęka. Most of the town's civilians, i. a. women and children assisting Polish soldiers, joined the fights against them⁵².

On the evening of 25 August 1920, the attempts of Gai's 3rd Cavalry Corps to break through the Polish cordon near Kolno were unsuccessful. The bloody fights near Kolno ended the 1920 Battle of Warsaw. At the same time, they closed an important chapter in the most recent history of Northeastern Mazovia, that is the events of the 1920s Bolshevik invasion of Poland.

It is worth pointing out that in resisting the Bolshevik invasion, the people of the Northeastern Mazovia, both townsmen and villagers, played an important role.

⁴⁹ Wyzwolenie 1920, No. 41, p. 455.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Wyzwolenie 1920, No. 35, pp. 390–391; L. Mitkiewicz, *W wojsku polskim 1917–1921*. Wyd. Veritas, Londyn 1976, p. 220; J. Piłsudski in an interview for "Kurier Poranny" on 26 August 1920, said: "The peasants hunt for the Bolsheviks and have their cruel revenge".

⁵² Gazeta Polowa 1920, No. 3, p. 3; Kurier Warszawski 1920, No. 238, pp. 1–2; Zorza 1920, No. 37, p. 267; J. Szczepański, *Wojna 1920 r. w Ostrołęckiem...*, p. 129.

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SUMMARY

During the Bolshevik invasion of Poland in the summer of 1920, Northeastern Mazovia lands played an important role. They became the place of retreat of the main Polish forces that were part of the Northeastern Front, fiercely attacked by the troops of Mikhail Tukhachevsky's Western Front. The main aim of the Red Army offensive was the occupation of Poland, its sovietization and the transfer of the Bolshevik revolution ideas to the west of Europe. Except for the communists, all the social classes of Northeastern Mazovia, especially the clergy, landowners, schoolchildren, villagers, supported the Council of National Defence.

The success of the decisive battle plan, later called the Battle of Warsaw, largely depended on the longest possible containment of the Soviet offensive near Łomża, Ostrołęka, Różan and Pułtusk, using the natural defensive line the Narew river was. Thanks to the fierce defence of the towns mentioned above, it was possible to delay the march of the Bolshevik armies towards the Vistula. On their way, the framework of the Soviet authority began to be established, whose symbol were the so-called "rewkoms" (military revolutionary committees). After the breakthrough in the Battle of Warsaw, the inhabitants of Northeastern Mazovia, especially peasants, started fighting against the Red Army troops retreating east.

STRESZCZENIE

Podczas najazdu bolszewickiego na Polskę latem 1920 r. ziemie Mazowska Północno-Wschodniego odegrały istotną rolę. Stały się miejscem odwrotu głównych sił polskich oddziałów, wchodzących w skład frontu północno-wschodniego, zaciekle atakowanych przez wojska frontu zachodniego Michała

Tuchaczewskiego. Głównym celem ofensywy Armii Czerwonej było zajęcie Polski, jej sowietyzacja i przeniesienie ideałów rewolucji bolszewickiej na zachód Europy. Wszystkie warstwy społeczeństwa Mazowsza Północno-Wschodniego, poza komunistami, a zwłaszcza duchowieństwo, ziemiaństwo, młodzież szkolna, ludność wiejska, udzieliły wsparcia Radzie Obrony Państwa.

Powodzenie planu rozstrzygającej bitwy, zwanej później Bitwą Warszawską, w dużym stopniu zależało od jak najdłuższego powstrzymywania sowieckiej ofensywy pod Łomżą, Ostrołęką, Różanem i Pułtuskim, z wykorzystaniem naturalnej linii obronnej, jaką stanowiła rzeka Narew. Dzięki zaciętej obronie powyższych miast udało się opóźnić pochód wojsk bolszewickich ku Wiśle. Na ich szlaku zaczęto tworzyć zręby władzy sowieckiej, ich symbolem były tzw. rewkomy. Po przełomie w Bitwie Warszawskiej mieszkańcy Mazowsza Północno-Wschodniego, a zwłaszcza chłopci, przystąpili do walki z wycofującymi się na wschód oddziałami Armii Czerwonej.

Key words: Polish-Bolshevik war in 1920, Northeastern Mazovia, Tukhachevsky, the Narew river, the defence of towns, the Battle of Warsaw in 1920, military revolutionary committees (“rewkoms”)

Słowa kluczowe: wojna polsko-bolszewicka 1920 r., Mazowsze Północno-Wschodnie, Tuchaczewski, Narew, obrona miast, Bitwa Warszawska 1920 r., rewkomy

