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## **GRODNO PODCZAS WIELKIEJ WOJNY (1914–1918)**

### **GRODNO IN THE YEARS OF THE GREAT WAR (1914–1918)**

#### **Introduction**

The geographical position of Grodno, precisely its border location, contributed to the uniqueness of its history. The city arose as a result of Slavic colonization in the 10th-11th centuries. It became a fortified settlement on the lands of the Baltic tribes. Since the beginning of the 12th century, it was the center of an independent Grodno principality and an outpost on the western lands of Belarus. Its position in the middle reaches of the Neman River made it the gateway to the whole Neman region. Neman is the hallmark river for Belarusians, Lithuanians and Poles. In ancient times it was one of the peripheral branches of the famous route "from the Varangians to the Greeks". The development of surrounding large forest areas spanned across several centuries. This included the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. At those times Grodno had an important political and economic significance. Grand dukes and kings had their residences in the city; here passed the Sejms; in the New Castle, Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of the Commonwealth, signed his renunciation.

In the 19th century Grodno becomes a provincial town of the Russian Empire, situated on the border with the Kingdom of Poland and Eastern Prussia. In the second half of the same century the railway route St. Petersburg–Warsaw crossed the town. This fact further strengthened the role of Grodno in the strategic military plans of the Russian authorities.

The history of Grodno showcases a fine example of the evolution of fortification forms: from the simplest soil and timber structures to the powerful fortifications. Each time period in almost thousand-year history of the city influenced its fortifications. They became a reliable defense in numerous military conflicts. At the end of the 18th century, after the inclusion of Grodno into the Russian Empire, the first plans for new fortifications were developed. However, for various reasons none of the plans of the late 18–19th centuries were ever implemented.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> С. Пивоварчик, *Белорусские земли в системе фортификационного строительства Российской империи и СССР (1772–1941)*. Гродно 2006, pp. 94–96.

### **Fortification System in Grodno**

The strategic importance of Grodno increased in connection with the development of new mobilization plans by the Russian authorities after the Russo-Japanese War. With the introduction of the military plan in 1912, Kovno, Brest-Litovsk, Osovets, and Grodno were to be reinforced as they were situated on line of deployment of the Russian troops. The strategic importance of Grodno increased due to its flanking (lateral) position regarding the direction of German troops towards Brest-Litovsk. The city was also to provide a shield to the Petersburg–Warsaw railway and bridges across the Neman River. On August 4, 1912 the Grodno Fortress Project, developed by the Fortress Commission with the changes introduced by the General Staff Committee, was approved by Emperor Nicholas II.<sup>2</sup> On August 23, 1913 Grodno was declared a fortress, even though the works on the main fortress position were at the initial stage and the fortress didn't yet house a full-fledged garrison and armament.

Before World War I, fortifications were built on the basis of three main design projects by N.A. Buinitsky, K.I. Velichko and V.V. Malkov-Panin. After the Russo-Japanese War those specific projects were adopted by the Main Engineering Administration for Russian fortresses. The design technology of the fort was such that almost from the very beginning of its construction it was ready for the defense. At the initial construction stage it emerged as a field redoubt that is a foundation pit for a breastwork in the capacity of a firing trench. Then, it became a temporary reinforcement that was comprised of a ready-made concrete breastwork and a ditch with rudiments of mine countermeasures galleries and posterns that could be used as safe places during the bombardment of the location. At the very last stage, the builders moved forward with the construction of transitional caponiers and semi-caponiers, coffers, and barracks, finishing of the escarp and counter-escarp. Finally, the object was turning into a long-term defensive stronghold - fort.

The fortress position was organized from a number of sturdy strongholds. Their main task was to defend the fortress position itself and the approaches to it by flanking fire of light weapons. The artillery of the fort intended for artillery combat, under coverage of infantry positions from the front, was scattered between the forts and well-disguised. Artillery had to be mobile to be able to change positions. This was achieved by the developed network of fort's roads. Intermediate positions of artillery and infantry had to be equipped with strong long-term and temporary barriers; safe from the enemy's fire shelters and repositories of firearms. Each fort, if its position among other strongholds of the fortress suited, could become the main stronghold of the fortified group. New principles of the construction of long-term structures in Russian fortresses were fully used in the design and construction of forts in Grodno and Novogeorgievsk (Modlin). This made these fortresses the most modern of their times and capable of long-term defense.

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<sup>2</sup> *Соображения о стратегическом назначении Гродненской крепости 1912 г.* Российский государственный военно-исторический архив (hereafter РГВИА), фонд 13129, опись 1, дело 499, pp. 6–6об.

By the beginning of the World War I, hardly any of the forts of the Grodno Fortification System were fifty percent ready. On most Grodno forts, only infantry (shooting) breastworks and sub-breastwork galleries were erected. The breastworks were constructed by a "sectional" method. By the beginning of the war, they had not been finished yet anywhere. No coffer (some of the forts were at the initial stage of their construction), no caponiers, let alone posterns, countermine galleries and barracks. This is not surprising because there were two incomplete construction seasons at the disposal of the builders. Also meager allocations and the bureaucracy of military and civil officials were slowing down the project. In Grodno, in fact, only the framework of the fortress position was prepared, which, however, had rather strong defensive capabilities.

### **World War I: Outbreak 1914**

With the outbreak of the World War I, Grodno became an important operational base for Russian troops. In accordance with the mobilization plan of 1912, the fortress of Grodno (together with the fortresses of Novogeorgievsk and Osovets) was to be subordinated to the commander of the 2nd Russian Army the General of the Cavalry A.V. Samsonov. This army was to be deployed on the 20th day of the mobilization in the region of Lomza-Białystok-Grodno. From this point the 2nd Army in cooperation with the 1st Army was to strike at East Prussia.

On July 13, 1914, under the highest order, the commandant of the fortress, the General of the Infantry, M.N. Kaigorodov signed an order according to which the state of defense was declared in Grodno.<sup>3</sup> On August 1, 1914 on the orders of the army commander, the city of Grodno and the fortress district were transferred to a state of siege.<sup>4</sup>

In early August, the 26th Infantry Division left the fortifications of the Grodno Fortress and marched toward East Prussia, where the 1st and 2nd Russian armies were striking. The division crossed the border on August 5 and began to move forward in the direction of the town of Lyk. At the beginning of the war, the Russian army was successful and the Grodno fortress was deep behind the Russian lines. The 3rd Guards Infantry Division, part of the 1st Army, was left in Sokółka. It was supposed to protect Grodno in the event of possible German offensive.

However, the successful actions of the 1st and 2nd Russian Armies in East Prussia did not have a long-lasting impact. Soon they suffered a crushing defeat. The command of the 8th German Army (General P. Hindenburg) was able to covertly concentrate its forces over the front of the General Samsonov's 2nd Army and inflict a heavy defeat on it. Part of the Army was defeated, the rest - randomly retreated to the border. At the end of August 1914, the German troops launched an offensive against the positions of the 1st Russian Army. As a result of heavy

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<sup>3</sup> Приказы, постановления, распоряжения коменданта, начальника инженеров и строителя Гродненской крепости о назначении офицеров на должности 1914 г. Национальный исторический архив Беларуси в Гродно (hereafter НИАБГ), фонд 731, опись 1, дело 6, р. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

fighting, the army of General Rennenkampff retreated to the Nemen River. The German troops took the cities of Augustów and Suwałki and acquired the possibility of reaching Grodno.

The formation of the 10th Army began with the purpose of stabilizing the Russian battle front in the region of Grodno. The General of Infantry V.E. Flug assumed its command. The new Russian Army was to include the 22nd Infantry Corps, the 2nd Caucasian, 3rd Siberian and 1st Turkestan Corps. By mid-September, all the forces of the 10th Army had been drawn to the Osovets-Stabin-Lipsk-Sopotsk front, and the Adjutant-General N. V. Ruzsky was appointed the new Commander of the North-Western Front. The headquarters of the front and the army were stationed in Grodno. General Flug developed a plan for a counter-offensive against enemy troops. The main blow had to be inflicted by the forces of the 22 Corps from the Sopotsk town area. It was aiming in the northern direction, precisely in the rear of the German grouping that came down to the Niemen River.<sup>5</sup>

September 13-14, 1914, the offensive of the 22nd Army and 2nd Caucasian Corps of the 10th Army began. Simultaneously with that, the 3rd Siberian and 1st Turkestan Corps stroke in the direction of the cities of Augustów-Lyck. The 1st Finnish Rifle Brigade drove back the enemy, located in the vicinity of Sopotsk to the Augustów Canal. By the evening of September 15, Augustów was taken; by September 20 – Suwalki. The 8th German Army retreated to East Prussia. Thus, the first battles in the Grodno fortress area ended safely for the Russian troops and the city.

### **Augustów Operation (in the German literature “The Winter Battle of the Masurian Lakes”)**

The next stage in the participation of the Grodno fortress in the war was the Augustów Operation (in the German literature "The Winter Battle of the Masurian Lakes"). IT signified the defeat of the 10th Army of the North-Western Front. In February 1915, during the retreat from East Prussia, the 20th Army Corps under the command of General P.I. Bulgakov was defeated in the Augustów Forest. The causes of the 20th Corps perishing are as follows: the miscalculations of the high command, the mismanagement of the Corps Commander, physical fatigue of the people. Undoubtedly, the indecision of the command of the 10th Army and the fear of the commandant to weaken the fortress's positions did not allow most of the soldiers and officers of the 20th corps to escape from the encirclement. Had the troops of the Grodno Fortress taken the leading positions before the Germans got there, the 20<sup>th</sup> Corps would have been saved. It would have been possible to avoid numerous victims. The Russian generals, officers and soldiers would not have suffered the bitterness of captivity.

### **The Great Retreat 1915**

The last stage of the participation of the Grodno Fortress in the World War I warfare is connected with the "Great Retreat" in the summer of 1915. As a result of

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<sup>5</sup> А. Зайончковский, *Первая мировая война*. Санкт-Петербург 2002, pp. 264–270.

the successful offensive by German troops in the Carpathians and near Prasnysk, the Russian troops abandoned virtually the whole territory of Poland. On July 22, the Russian flag was lowered in the fortress of Ivangorod. On July 24, 1915, German troops entered Warsaw; August 4, Kovno fell; August 6- Novogeorgievsk. On the night of August 9 to August 10 the Osovets fortress was abandoned by Russian troops. On August 12 Brest-Litovsk fell.

On the night of August 6, 1915, the headquarters of the 10th Army and the commandant of the Grodno Fortress received a telegram from the Commander-in-Chief of the North-Western Front in which it was reported that "the fortress of Grodno is considered to be a strengthened position on the Neman-Grodno-Brest front, and ordered to proceed immediately to the evacuation of fortress's stock and property." <sup>6</sup> Since that time, the Grodno fortress has been relegated to the usual frontline fortified position and, theoretically, as a fortress ceased to exist.

In the *Journal of Military Operations of the Grodno Fortress and Squad* no military clashes with the German troops were registered until August 17. On the morning of August 18, the offensive of the 1st and 11th Landwehr and 75th Reserve Divisions of the Germans at the front of the 1st Army Corps began. Fierce fighting took place in the area of forts I–VI, XII–XIII. On August 19 at 10:30 the order of the 1st Army commander for the withdrawal was received. The Grodno detachment and neighboring corps had to retreat to the right bank of the Neman. The departure was ordered to begin at 12 o'clock in the morning. During the withdrawal, an order was executed to destroy the defensive structures of the left-bank fortress contour. According to the report of the Engineers' Chief, 11 forts, 14 strong points, 5 concrete cellars, 5 bridges across the Neman River, 4 across the Lososno River and all floating means were blown up. Forty-eight sets of water pumps and various mechanical installations on fort lines, 30 engines of mechanical installations belonging to private persons, city government and state institutions, all engineering buildings and warehouses, and also some stone buildings, including a railway station were destroyed as well. In addition, more than 700 000 poods\* (42 735 kg) of various property (including food and fodder) to be evacuated were destroyed. From the fortress it was not possible to take out 50,000 barrels of cement, a lot of iron, shells and smoke powder for Japanese howitzers, 500 000 poods\* of flour, 60 000 poods\* of cereals, 932 poods\* of peas, 37 000 poods\* of salt, 43 000 poods\* of oats and barley, 94 thousand poods\* of hay, 27 thousand poods\* of millcake. <sup>7</sup> Evacuation failed to be fully implemented due to the shortage of mobile transport and the rapid takeover of the fortress. The removal of property from the station of Lososno ceased on August 19, from the station of Grodno – on August 20.

<sup>6</sup> Журнал военных действий крепости Гродно и Гродненского отряда. С 1-го июля по 21-го августа 1915, РГВИА, фонд 13129, опись 1, дело 231, р. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

\*The conversion rate of pood to kg to lb is as follows: one pood equals 16.387 kg or 36.11 lb (Am).

By the evening of August 21, the German troops managed to cross the Nemen River. In the city itself fierce fighting began in the area of the Governor's Palace, the army barracks, the railway station. Russian troops were knocked out of the city and the fighting moved to the area of forts XII, XIII and the stronghold «У» (rus.), which covered the city from the north. The Germans, who took the city from the south-western and western directions, launched an offensive in the rear of the defensive position. According to German sources, Russian troops lost the battle for Grodno with up to 3,500 killed and 2,700 captured.

The Russian 1st Army retreated 25–30 km in the eastern direction after the combats in the Grodno Fortress, and the army command moved to the city of Lida. The defensive line of the army relied on natural obstacles and passed along the line of the village. Porechye-Ozyory village-r. Pyra-r. Kotra (d. Skidel)-r. Neman (near the village of Mazanovo) and was held by Russian troops until the end of August 1915. However, during the Vilnius defensive operation the 10th and 5th armies of the Western Front that belonged to the Russian troops were forced to retreat further east to the boundary of the Berezina-Servech River.

The Grodno fortress, despite the incompleteness of the fortification construction, was an important operational base for the Russian army. It was the place for the formation and training of units that later took part in hostilities at the front. It was also the point of material and technical support for troops, and a strong moral beacon for the army and the population. Historically, it turned out that the decision to build a fortress in Grodno was approved by the Russian authorities shortly before the World War I and the collapse of the state. Therefore Grodno fortress became the last fortress of the Russian Empire.

### **The Fortress and Grodno under the German Occupation**

In early September 1915, a meeting of the German High Command took place in Grodno, at which it was decided to form a new Army on the Eastern Front.<sup>8</sup> It received an ordinal number 12 and the General of Infantry Max von Faubeck was appointed the Commander. First, the headquarters of the 12th German Army was located in Grodno, and then moved to the city of Lida. Until the end of the war, Grodno was in the duty area of the 12th Army.

To normalize life in the occupied territory and provide the German army with everything necessary behind the lines, the Germans organized stage (rearward) inspections. The power and control in Grodno were executed by the stage inspector of the 12th Army, the General of the Infantry Richard von Kolevé, later Lieutenant-General Baron Erich von Seckendorff was appointed to this post.<sup>9</sup>

The German command retained the status of the Grodno Fortress and the fortress area of Grodno. In the event of Russian army offensive, it was decided to

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<sup>8</sup> Н. Cron, *Imperial German army. 1914–1918. Organisation, Structure, Orders of Battle*. London 2002, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Б. Маціяс, *Ober Ost i нямецкая акупацыя Гародні ў Першую сусветную вайну пагодле Дзённіка Курта Кламрота*, [Ін:] *Гістарычны альманах*. Гродна 2012, т. 18, p. 48.

start building new fortifications. For this purpose, the Military-Construction Administration was established in the fortress. Meticulous Germans gathered building materials in the warehouses of the Administration on Alexandrovskaya Street. Military trophies captured by the German troops in Grodno were collected at the central fortress at Forstadt.

The fortified contour of Grodno was divided into three divisions: "North-East", "West" and "South". The defense departments "North-East" and "South" were of paramount importance, hence, the possible offensive of the Russian troops was expected from those directions. A number of undertakings were carried out to bring the fortress position into the combat state. The fortifications, blown up by the Russian army during their retreat, were partially dismantled (metal structures were removed, concrete blockages were disassembled), in some cases adapted for defense. In addition, to strengthen the defensive qualities of the Grodno defensive position, the Germans erected field positions with a significant number of new concrete structures: dugouts, shelters, observation posts and firing points. In total, about 160 fortifications were built.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the construction work carried out by the German army in 1916–1918, the defensive position of Grodno was significantly strengthened. The German command formed the garrison of Grodno. It included a number of special fortress units (depot, telephone battalion, telegraph-building company, hauling stock, car park, food warehouse, military hospital), as well as seven Landsturm battalions, several Landsturm sapper companies, artillery divisions and road building company. In addition, the city hosted numerous institutions and logistical units of the 12th Army: the army air park and the 12th Army's stage aeronautic fleet, an artillery warehouse and park, a bacteriological research station, several cart and car columns, and military hospitals. For the Russian prisoners of war, a collective station and a camp were organized.

Civil power in Grodno was represented by officers of the German army. The governor of Grodno was appointed General of the Infantry Ludwig von Held. He stayed in the city until the spring of 1917. From April 1916 the mayor-captain Hans Weisenborn became the Head of the Civilian Occupation Authorities in the city. All military power in the occupied city was under the command of the 12th Army Stage Inspection.<sup>11</sup> In his work the mayor closely cooperated with the City Committee under the leadership of Prince Sapieha. It was formed on the citizens' initiative at the end of 1915 or at the beginning of 1916.

The German authorities closely regulated civil life in Grodno. Residents were strictly forbidden to trade liquor (a monopoly for sale was introduced), bread and potatoes. Also was prohibited the use cameras, fishing, especially in the areas of bridges. In the city, cards for bread were introduced, and the inhabitants had to redeem them at a certain bakery. At the end of 1916, strict food allowance was introduced for the inhabitants of Grodno: 300 g of potatoes a day, 225 g of grain or flour. Strict guidelines were introduced for soap usage (one could not use it to wash clothes, soap-like solution was used instead).

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<sup>10</sup> *Encyklopedia wojskowa*. Edit. Mjr. Ottona Laskowskiego. Warszawa 1933, t. III, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> Б. Маціяс, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Until the end of 1915 the German authorities built important strategic facilities in Grodno – the railway and highway bridges across the Neman. A number of industrial enterprises were organized in the city: a tobacco factory of the Shereshevsky brothers, a marmalade factory, straw articles works, bakery, brick factories, railway workshops, and tanneries.

On June 1, 1916, German Emperor Wilhelm II visited Grodno. The visit took place as part of an inspection trip around the Eastern Front, and besides Grodno, the Kaiser visited Vilna, Lida, Slonim. The emperor inspected the troops of the garrison and took part in a field prayer. After the prayer, Wilhelm had a talk with the priest and visited the hospital for convalescing soldiers and officers in the New Castle.

### **The End of War and Transfer of the Authority in the City**

After the war ended in November 1918, the German army continued to be on the occupied eastern territories. Command here was concentrated in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief of the 10th German Army. The highest military authority in Grodno was the Commandant's Office with troops subordinate to it. After the November Revolution in Germany, Soldiers' Councils (Soldatenrat) were formed in the German army. Such councils were also operating in Grodno. There was a soldier's council under the Commandant's Office, the Council under Kreizamt (the German civil authority governing the city), the City Soldiers' Council. All the decisions were taken only with the consent of the latter authorities.

At the same time, the Provisional City Committee continued to operate in Grodno (Chairman - Edward Listowski). The Committee included representatives of the main nationalities living in Grodno: Poles, Russians and Jews (the Russian Government, the Polish Democratic Committee, Jewish organizations, The Workers' Party). Prompted by the ending of the war, the committee raised the question with the German occupational authorities. It concerned the transfer of the economic power to the city. At the end of 1918, the Germans in Grodno agreed to give the Provisional City Committee also police functions. The City Committee planned to create a Polish-Jewish-Russian militia. However, the Commandant of Grodno, General von Donop did not agree to this concession and kept the German military police in the city. At the same time, the police function in the county was no longer carried out by the Germans. This contributed to the rapid formation of Polish paramilitary forces.

On December 19, 1918, the Germans began to transfer the municipal economy to the Provisional City Committee. This involved the transfer of food stores, slaughterhouse, microscopic station, hospital, pharmacy, city food storehouse, school buildings and schools. However, the executive power in Grodno remained exclusively in the hands of the German authorities, up to the complete evacuation of the German army.

Simultaneously with the activities of the Provisional Committee, other national and political authorities began to operate in Grodno: the formation of Polish local government began, and later the Bolshevik Council began to operate. At the end of 1918, there were three Belarusian organizations in Grodno: the National



Committee, Provincial Government, and Peasant District Council.<sup>12</sup> All these organizations expected the complete withdrawal of the occupational forces after which the question of power had to be decided.

In late February 1919, the gradual withdrawal of the German armed forces from the territory of Belarus began. The German command and representatives of the Polish Armed Forces began negotiations on the evacuation of Germans from Grodno and the transfer of the authority to the Poles. The German command was concerned that the city was not occupied by Bolshevik troops. Newly-formed states were competing for the city - Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian People's Republic and Soviet Russia. This entailed the creation of national military formations, since the claims of all parties were to be supported by the armed force. The most active and organized were the Polish armed detachments of "Grodno land self-defense."<sup>13</sup> As a result of political and military activities of national movements' representatives in the Grodno region, the German command decided to transfer the authority here to the Poles. April 15, 1919 the German-Polish negotiations ended in Grodno. The evacuation of German troops was to be carried out before May 1. The Lithuanian government and Belarusian representatives in Grodno objected to the transfer of the Grodno region to Poland. However, this did not lead to any tangible actions, and on April 28 Polish regular units entered Grodno, and the Belarusian regiment, which was stationed in the city, transferred under control of the fortress commandant, General Wojciech Falewicz.<sup>14</sup> A new stage in the history of Grodno began.

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<sup>12</sup> А. Чарнякевіч, *Нараджэнне беларускай Гародні: з гісторыі нацыянальнага руху 1909–1939.* Мінск 2015, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> K. Filipow, *Samoobrona polska na Kresach Wshodnich 1918–1919*, [In:] *Zeszyt Naukowy Muzeum Wojska. Białystok 1988*, No 3, p.191–2013; K. Filipow, *Rok 1918 na Grodzieńszczyźnie – nieznaną relacją por. Daniszewskiego*, [In:] *Zeszyt Naukowy Muzeum Wojska. Białystok 1993*, No 7, p.161–166.

<sup>14</sup> А. Чарнякевіч, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

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## SUMMARY

The article examines the events that took place in Grodno during the World War I. It establishes and describes the periods of the Grodno garrison's participation in the military operations of 1914–1915. It elaborates on the regime of German occupation from September 1915 until April 1919. It is emphasized that the Grodno Fortress, despite the incompleteness of its fortification construction, was an important operational base for the Russian army. It served as the place of formation and training for military units that later fought in the warfare at the front. While it was used as the point of material and technical support for troops, it served as a strong moral beacon for the army and the local population. In the late 1918 and early 1919, as a result of political and military activity of national movements' representatives, Grodno was transferred to the revived Polish State by the German command.

## STRESZCZENIE

W artykule analizowane są wydarzenia, które miały miejsce w Grodnie w latach I wojny światowej. Dokonuje się określenia i opisanie okresów uczestnictwa Grodzieńskiego Garnizonu w działaniach wojennych w latach 1914–1915, charakteryzuje się tryb niemieckiej okupacji od września 1915 do kwietnia 1919 r. Zwraca się szczególną uwagę na fakt, że grodzieńska twierdza, pomimo niekompletności budowy fortyfikacji, była dla Rosyjskiej Armii ważną bazą operacyjną, miejscem formacji i szkolenia oddziałów biorących następnie udział w walkach na froncie. Twierdza była także punktem logistycznym wojsk, ale w szczególności miała duże znaczenie moralne dla wojska i lokalnej ludności. Pod koniec 1918 r. i na początku 1919 r., w wyniku działalności polityczno-wojskowej przedstawicieli ruchów narodowych, Grodno zostało przekazane przez dowództwo niemieckie odrodzonymu Państwu Polskiemu.

**Key words:** fortress, fort, position, artillery, project, defense, garrison, armament, negotiations, occupation regime.

**Słowa kluczowe:** twierdza, fort, pozycja, artyleria, projekt, obrona, garnizon, uzbrojenie, negocjacje, okupacyjny reżim.