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# THE POLISH-SOVIET WAR THE BATTLE OF WARSAW 1920

Commander in Chief Marshal Józef Piłsudski  
saluting the detachments heading to the front,  
April 1920 (Central Military Archives  
of the Military History Office – CAW WBH)



# THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION



Soviet leaders (Vladimir Lenin and Lev Trotsky in the middle) celebrate the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Moscow, Red Square, 7 November 1919 (public domain).



Tableau presenting the Council of People's Commissars – Sovnarkom: V. Lenin, M.I. Kalinin, A. Rykov, F. Dzerzhinsky, G. Chicherin, A. Lunacharsky, N. Semashko, D. Kurski, N. Krestinsky, V. Schmidt, 2 January 1919 (public domain)

A revolution broke out in Russia in March of 1917 as a result of which Emperor Nicholas II abdicated the throne. A period of political upheaval began, as well as the battle between the “whites” (opposers of communists) and the “reds” (supporters of the revolution). In April of 1917 Vladimir Lenin was sent from Germany to Russia who, together with Lev Trotsky, revived the operation of the Bolsheviks. Stirring up unrest and anarchy in the Russian Army, they prepared to seize power. On 24 October (6 November) 1917 in Petersburg a Bolshevik coup d'état broke out initiating a three-year civil war in Russia. Seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was convenient for Germany, with whom the Bolsheviks had signed a peace treaty in Lithuanian Brest in 1818. The Russian Revolution inspired revolutionary-type campaigns in other countries, thereby becoming a threat to the internal stability of some European nations (e.g. Germany and Hungary). The independent Polish nation stood in the way of the global revolution of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”.

**R**ed Army Soldiers! The time has come for retaliation (...). Set your eyes to the west. The West is where the fate of the global revolution is decided. Over the corpse of white Poland lies the road to the worldwide inferno. We will carry joy and peace to the working masses on our bayonets. To the west! To the deciding battles, to great victory!

Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Smolensk, 2 July 1920.



Bolshevik soldiers in front of the State Duma in Petersburg, 1917 (Library of Congress)





From November 1918 the Russian Army began to prepare for its march to the west, in order to support the communist rebellion centres in Western Europe. On 4 January 1919 the Bolsheviks took over Vilnius and initiated military actions against Poland. From mid-February 1919 the counter-offensive of Polish armies under the command of Gen. Stanislaus Szeptycki was launched. On 16 April 1919 Polish formations under the command of Gen. Rydz-Śmigły and Col. Władysław Belina-Prażmowski, initiated the operations to liberate the Vilnius Region. Vilnius was liberated on 19 April 1919.

# THE VILNA OFFENSIVE

Army review carried out by Józef Piłsudski after taking over Vilnius, April 1919 (NAC)



Army review carried out by Józef Piłsudski after taking over Vilnius, April 1919 (NAC)



Chief of State Józef Piłsudski greeted by the people at the Sharp Gate in Vilnius, 27 April 1919 (NAC)

**T**he great cries of this crowd, kneeling in the street. I gazed at the Commandant. He stood facing the painting, leaning on his sabre, stern-faced and... from under his stern brow, a heavy tear flowed into his moustache. Śmigły stood behind him with some kind of nervous tic on his face. His face quivered and his tears also flowed. And Belina sobbed just like a child.



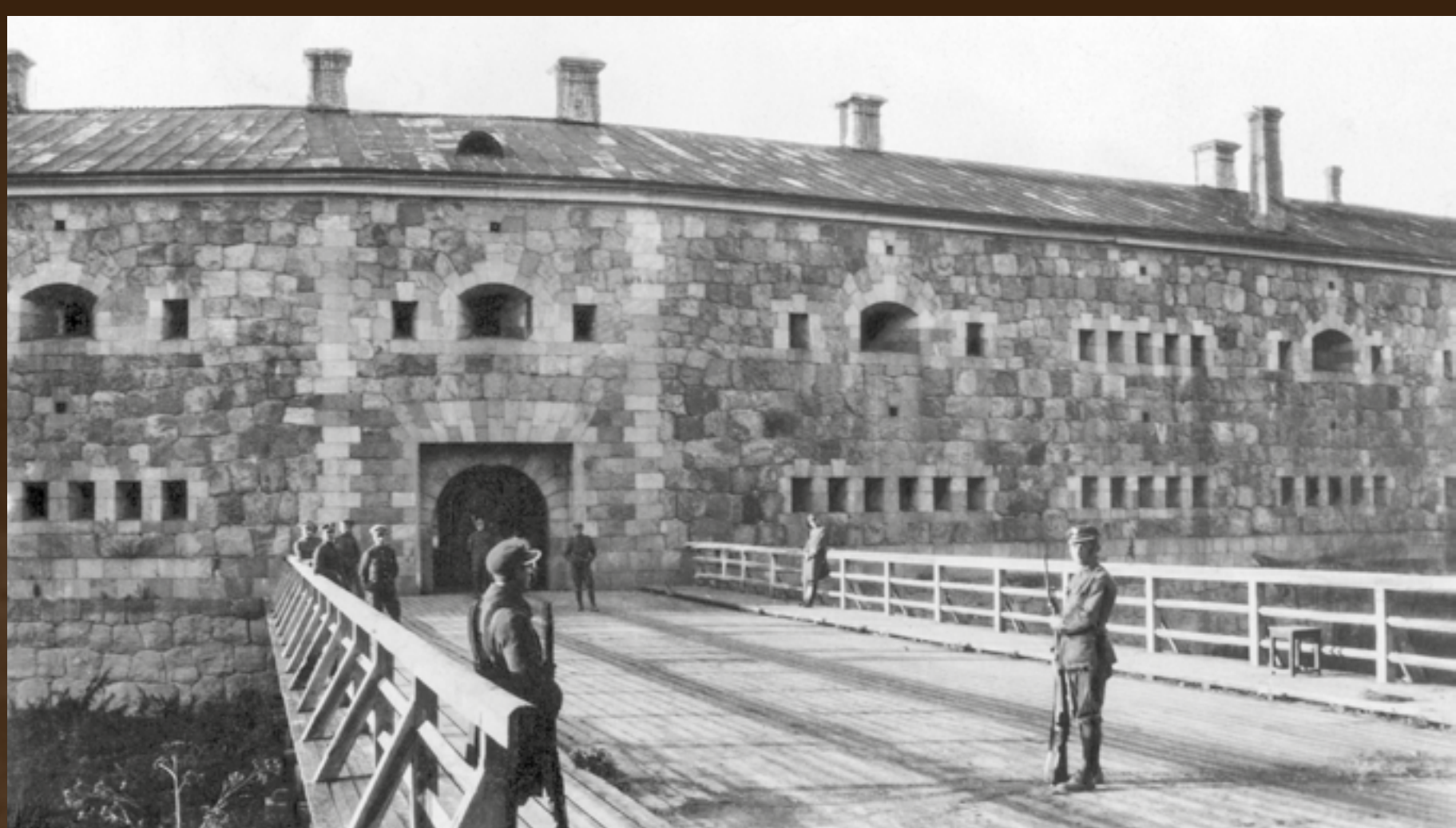
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Tadeusz Świącicki



# BATTLES IN 1919 AND THE SIEGE OF DAUGAVPILS

The Polish Army in Latvia during what was known as "Operation Winter", January 1920 (CAW WBH)



The Polish garrison of the Daugavpils fortress, 1920 (CAW WBH)

In spring and summer of 1919, Gen. Stanisław Szeptycki, Commander of the Lithuanian-Belarusian Front, led the battle with the Bolsheviks in the east. He took over Minsk on 9 August, Babruysk on 29 August, Barysaw on 11 September, and Polotsk on 22 September. In October and November of 1919 peace negotiations took place, which were interrupted in December of 1919 as a result of the successes of the Bolshevik Army in the battle with Anton Denikin's White Army. On 30 December 1919 a military alliance was entered into between Poland and the Latvian Republic. The Polish Army supported the Latvians in battle with the Bolsheviks during Operation Winter. On 3 January 1920 Gen. Rydz-Śmigły's Polish Army, with the support of the Latvian sources, liberated Daugavpils and subsequently removed the Bolshevik forces from Latgale.



The French produced tank, Renault FT-17 from the First Tank Regiment by Daugavpils, 1919 (CAW WBH)

Polish soldiers in the trenches outside of Daugavpils, 1919 (CAW WBH)



# THE KIEV OFFENSIVE

On 21 April 1920 in Vinnitsa an agreement was entered into between the governments of the Polish and Ukrainian People's Republic and – three days later – a military agreement was signed. Poland recognised the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic and the directorate of hetman Symon Petliura. The border between Poland and Ukraine was to be the Zbruch River. On 25 April 1920 the united Polish-Ukrainian forces launched a military operation aimed at taking over Kiev. Furthermore, the aim of the jointly undertaken campaign was to destroy the Soviet armies on the South-Western Front, as well as to gain the backup of the Ukrainians for Symon Petliura's government and create a Ukrainian army that could enter into battle with the Soviets. Józef Piłsudski took over commanding of the front and the forces of the Third Polish Army commandeered by General Edward Rydz-Śmigły led the main offensive. On 7 May 1920 Kiev was seized, where, on 9 May 1920, a joint procession of the Polish and Ukrainian armies took place.



The procession of the Polish cavalry in Kiev, 9 May 1920 (CAW WBH)

**T**he Republic of Poland began to help the Ukrainian People's Republic in a tangible way in its battle with the Muscovite-Bolshevik occupants, enabling detachments of that army to form on its lands, and that army is now headed to fight against Ukraine's enemies.

A fragment of the manifesto by hetman Symon Petliura, 26 April 1920.



The procession of the Polish artillery in Kiev, 9 May 1920 (CAW WBH)



Allied Ukrainian armies commandeered by hetman Symon Petliura (third from the left in the middle), after Polish army detachments entered Kiev, 10 May 1920 (CAW WBH)



# REVERSE

On 27 May 1920 detachments of the First Cavalry Army, commandeered by Siemion Buddiony, concentrated by Uman, launched an attack on the Polish detachments. On 5 June 1920 the "horse-army" broke the front by Samgorodok and began its energetic march behind the Polish units. On 4 July 1920 in Belorussia the main blow of the Soviet armies from the Western Front took place, commandeered by Mikhail Tukhachevsky, on the Polish armies of the North-Eastern Front. The systematic outflanking of the blows by the Soviet forces on the Polish positions resulted in the need for the Polish detachments to continuously back off from the front line. The Red Army pushed the Polish army back to the line of the Bug and Narva Rivers, negotiating a distance of over 400 km. On 10 August 1920 the front line moved dangerously closer to the Polish capital – it reached the line of the Mława, Przasnysz, Wyszaków and Siedlce.



A field mass by the chaplain of the 5th Legions' Infantry Regiment, Father Ziolkowski, during the retreat from Kiev, July 1920 (CAW WBH)

**T**he influence of this march was extensive. Mr Tukhachevsky wants to compare it to the march of the German Army to Paris. Indeed this continuous peristaltic motion of the majority of enemies, broken from time to time as if by leaps, lasting weeks, gives the impression of something irrefutable, looming like some kind of heavy, monstrous cloud, for which there is no barrier. There is something hopeless in it, breaking down the internal values of man and the masses. Impressed by this looming hail cloud, the country broke down, characters wavered, soldiers' hearts softened.

J. Piłsudski, 1920



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Crossing the Niemen River by the 10th Light Artillery Regiment, July 1920 (CAW WBH)



# PROVISIONAL POLISH REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE

On 23 July 1920 the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee (Polrevkom) was founded in Russia. On 2-3 August 1920 its representatives appeared in Białystok, with its head, Julian Marchlewski, as well as Feliks Dzerzhinsky and Feliks Kon. They announced the Manifesto of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee, the creation of the “Soviet Polish Socialist Republic of Councils” and seizure of power on “Polish lands”.

The Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee – “Polrevkom”, beginning of August 1920. In the middle row from the left: Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, Julian Marchlewski, Feliks Kon (public domain – Polona.pl)



*Heroes to Warsaw – Bolshevik poster, 1920 (AAN)*

**T**he gallant Red Army entered Polish territory. Expressing gratitude to you for this effective assistance, I believe it is my duty to inform you that, in order to run work on the territory liberated from the lords, the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee has been founded under the leadership of Comrade Julian Marchlewski, with the following committee members: Comrades Feliks Dzerzhinsky, Feliks Kon, Edward Próchniak and Józef Unszlicht. Following the example and experience of the Red Russia, we hope to quickly finalise the freeing of the peasant-worker Poland, and hang the Red Banner of the revolution over the closest Russian fortress of imperialism and reaction.

Fragment of a letter from Julian Marchlewski to Vladimir Lenin



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# POLISH LEADERS OF THE BATTLE OF WARSAW



Commander in Chief, Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Gen. Edward Rydz-Śmigły, (NAC)

This victory is the reason for an important holiday in Warsaw, it is Poland's victory. The prospective military operations were carried out by Polish generals on the basis of a Polish plan of action. My role, also as an officer from the French mission, was limited to completing missing details in the execution of the plan. We cooperated with our best intent in this task. Nothing more. This heroic Polish nation saved itself. France has enough of its own military glory and has no claim to amicable Poland's glory.

General Maxime Weygand on the victory near Warsaw

Following the lost battle with the approaching Bolshevik detachments of Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the Commander in Chief, Marshal Józef Piłsudski introduced changes in leadership. On 22 July 1920 he appointed Gen. Tadeusz Rozwadowski as Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces. Gen. Józef Haller became Commander of the North-Eastern Front. General Maxime Weygand became Staff Officer to the High Command. Other commanding officers during the Battle of Warsaw included General Władysław Sikorski – 5<sup>th</sup> Army (shielding Warsaw from the northwest), Gen. Władysław Latinik – 1<sup>st</sup> Army (defence of Warsaw's foregrounds), as well as General Bolesław Roja – 2<sup>nd</sup> Army (defence of the Vistula line from Warsaw to Dęblin). The Middle Front – 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Army – was led by General Edward Rydz-Śmigły. Command of the counterattack of the manoeuvring group from Wieprz fell to the Commander in Chief, Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Gen. Edward Rydz-Śmigły. The Southern Front was commandeered by Gen. Wacław Iwaszkiewicz-Rudoszański.



General Józef Haller, the General Inspector of the Volunteer Army in 1920, Commander of the Northern Front, President of the Civic Defense Committee (on the train from the left) surrounded by his staff (NAC)



Gen. Tadeusz Rozwadowski (Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces during the Battle of Warsaw in 1920) touring the front near Warsaw, August 1920 (CAW WBH)



General Władysław Sikorski, Commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army and writer Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski observing the march of the voluntary detachments in Nasielsk, 19 August 1920 (CAW WBH)



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# VOLUNTEER ARMY

On 3 July 1920 the Council of National Defense undertook the decision to form the Volunteer Army led by Gen. Józef Haller and called upon Polish citizens to join it. Among others, school and university students, fraternity members, the Voluntary Legion of Women, workers, the voluntary state police formation and the Civic Guard, took part in the Battle of Warsaw and the counteroffensive by the Vistula, Wkra and Wieprz. Over 100,000 soldiers in total.



Procession of the Kosynierzy Unit of the Independent Workers' Association defiling before Gen. Józef Haller on the holiday of the Voluntary Army. Warsaw, 18 July 1920 (CAW WBH)



March of Warsaw middle school youth to the front. Warsaw-Praga district, August 1920 (CAW WBH)

**Volunteer Army Soldiers! (...)**  
Now the time has come for you who, as volunteers, wish to assist the active Army and, together with it, wish to fight. You have risen to defend the Polish lands, to defend the life and property of its citizens, to defend the freedom and the holiest ideals of Poland from the deluge of barbarity and unforgiving revenge over our Fatherland (...)  
Thus, as the insurgents of 1863, who stand in the ranks together with us, you will wear the honourable ribbon of insurgents. (...)  
The motto of the volunteer – “To battle!” Response – “To victory!”  
That’s how we will greet one another! May God be with you!

By order of the General Inspector of the Volunteer Army, Gen. Józef Haller.

Jasio Nowiński – one of the underage volunteers, July-August 1920 (NAC)



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# DEFENCE OF THE VISTULA (WŁOCŁAWEK, PŁOCK)

**W**łocławek frantically defended itself from the trenches, dug into dockside streets. The Bolsheviks showered the city with a hurricane of bullets. However, they did not cross the Vistula. Those who survived, defended themselves in the trenches. Civilians, a slim group of soldiers, police, militia, volunteers. Women and children, sneaking from one doorway to the next, in spite of the bullets and missiles, carried ammunition, food, bread and coffee to the very trenches. One girl lost both legs from a Bolshevik grenade.

A letter from Lt. Kazimierz Miter to his family



Street ditches and banks erected by the defenders of Płock, 18 August 1920 (CAW WBH)

The task of the Bolshevik formations furthest to the west, in mid-August of 1920, was to circumvent/bypass Warsaw from the north, cross the Vistula line and exit directly behind the Polish armies. On 15-18 August 1920 the defenders of Włocławek successfully stopped the Bolshevik detachments from crossing the Vistula. On 18-19 August 1920, Gay-Khan's 3 Cavalry Corps undertook an attempt at crossing the Vistula in Płock. This attack was heroically defended by the inhabitants of the town and Polish army detachments.



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Volunteers in the trenches in defence of Włocławek, 18 August 1920 (Museum of the Kujawy and Dobrzyń Land in Włocławek)

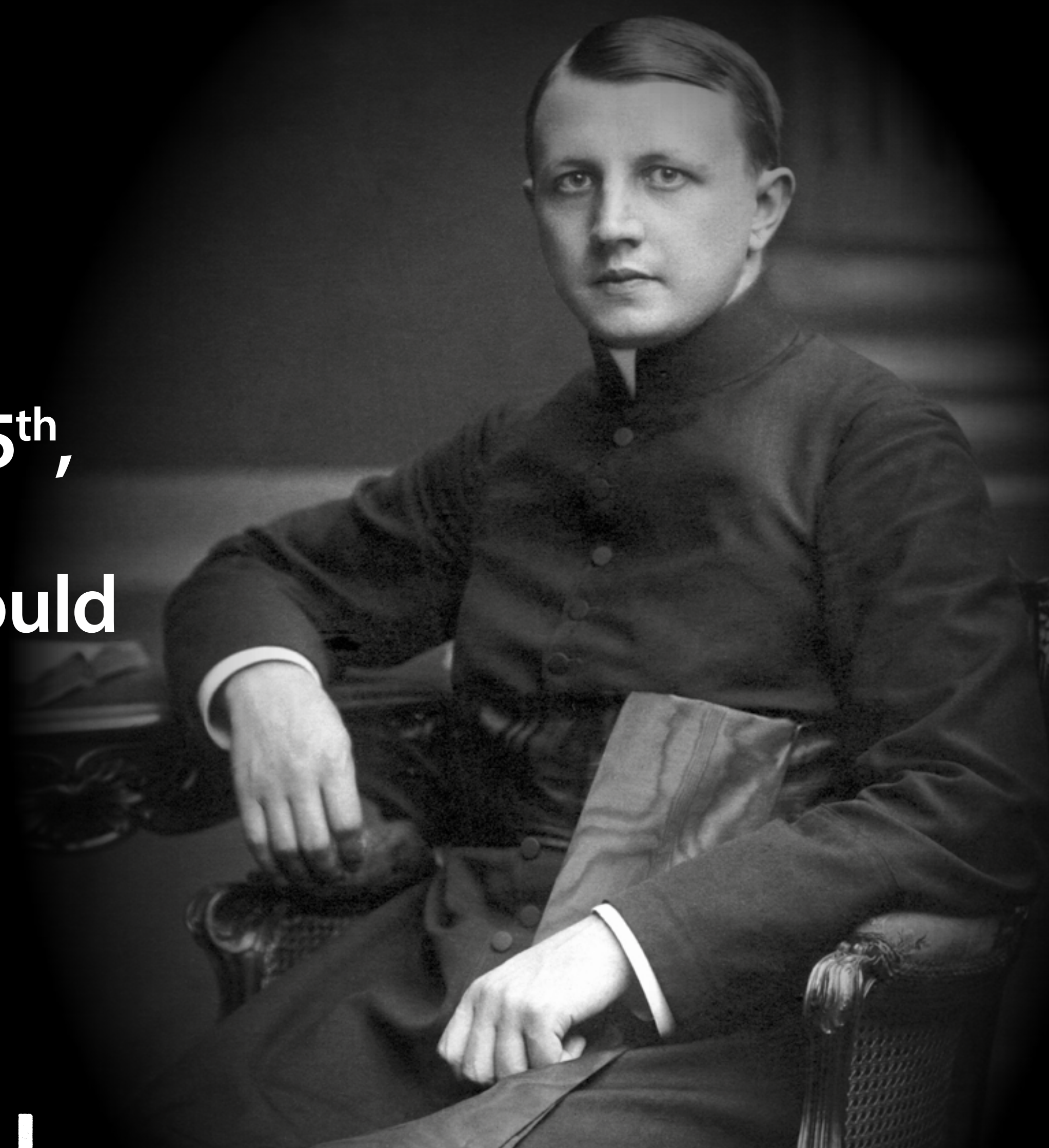


On 13 August 1920 the detachments of the 16<sup>th</sup> Bolshevik Army attacked Radzymin and broke the Polish defence. On 14 and 15 August bitter battles took place outside of Warsaw. The defenders managed to stop and oust the Bolshevik formations from Radzymin. Father Ignacy Skorupka, a voluntary chaplain with the 236<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Volunteer Army, perished outside of Ossów. On 14 August a counteroffensive was launched by the 5<sup>th</sup> Army of General Władysław Sikorski from by the Wkra River, attacking mainly the Bolshevik forces and attempting to circumvent/bypass Warsaw from the northwest.

**M**ore victims awaited us but not long from now – on the 15<sup>th</sup>, the day of Our Queen, fate would be on our side.

Father Ignacy Skorupka

Father Ignacy Skorupka, chaplain of the Volunteer Army, perished on 14 August 1920 by Ossów (The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London/KARTA Centre)



In the battle of Ossów a young soldier could not withstand the attack and began to retreat. Officers and the commander of the regiment were retreating. It was then that Father Skorupka gathered a dozen or so boys around him and headed out. Seeing the retreating commander of the regiment, he shouted "Colonel, forward!" "And you Father?" asked the colonel. "Sir, follow me! Boys, follow me!" They headed out. Many perished and Father Skorupka also fell from a grenade attack.

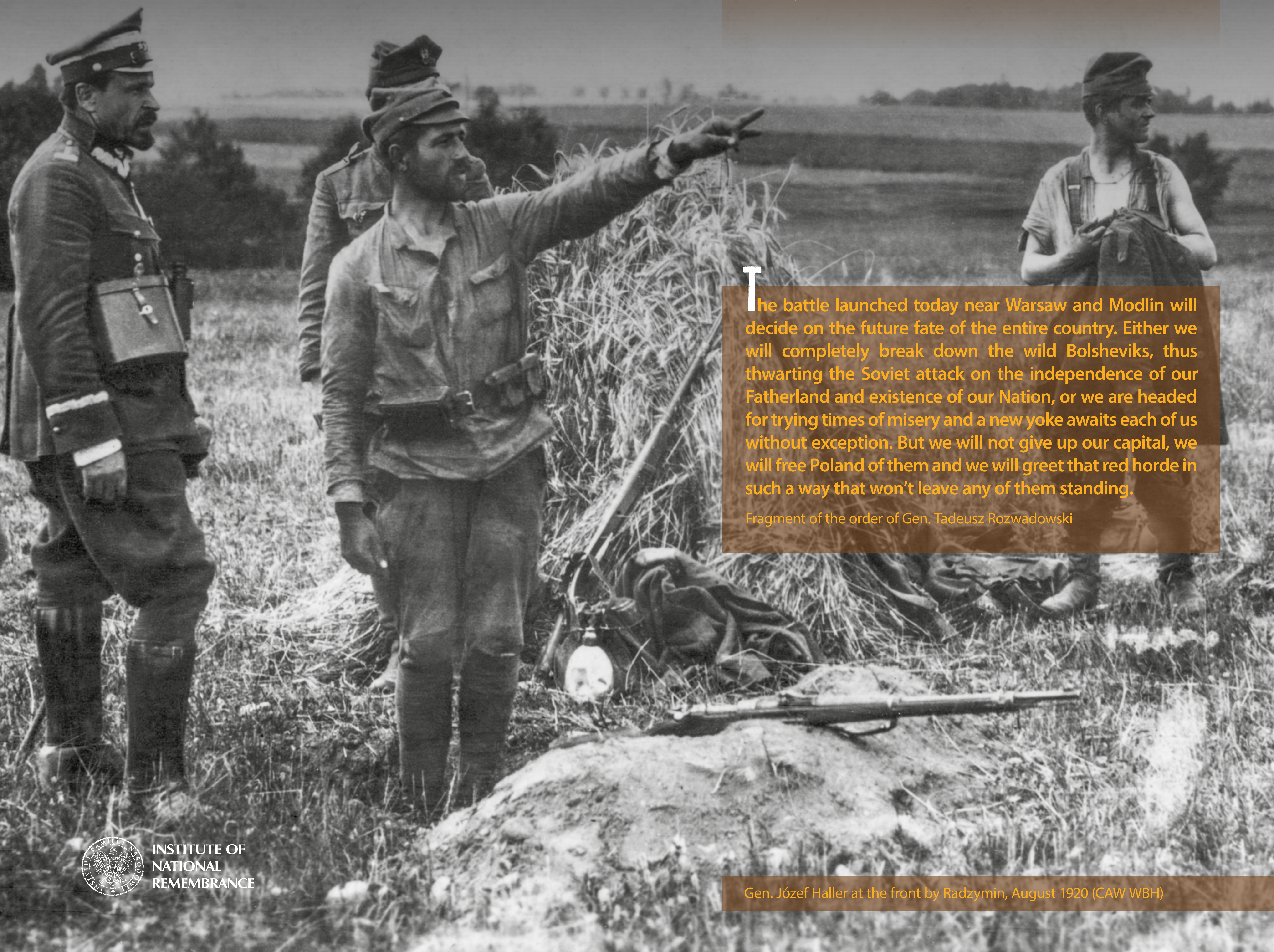
Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski, according to the testimonies of the injured near Ossów

The battle launched today near Warsaw and Modlin will decide on the future fate of the entire country. Either we will completely break down the wild Bolsheviks, thus thwarting the Soviet attack on the independence of our Fatherland and existence of our Nation, or we are headed for trying times of misery and a new yoke awaits each of us without exception. But we will not give up our capital, we will free Poland of them and we will greet that red horde in such a way that won't leave any of them standing.

Fragment of the order of Gen. Tadeusz Rozwadowski

Gen. Józef Haller at the front by Radzymin, August 1920 (CAW WBH)

# BATTLES ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF WARSAW



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# ALLIES



Capitan Merian Caldwell Cooper, one of the commanders of Tadeusz Kościuszko's 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron, cavalier of the Virtuti Militari Order (Bill Simpson/Amberley Publishing/East News)



Reproduction of the portrait of Col. Adrian Carton de Wiart (1880–1963), painted by Wojciech Kossak (public domain)

**T**he Battle of Warsaw was dubbed “Miracle on the Vistula” and it must be said that never had a miracle been more timely as there was so much at stake. Had Warsaw fallen, Poland, as well as the majority of Germany and Czechoslovakia, would have become communist states.

Adrian Carton de Wiart (1880–1963), a member of the British military mission in Poland

**W**e came to fight for Poland on the rights and duties of Polish officers. Nothing more. That evening our staff seized a report in which a Bolshevik general explained that his attack [...] had been unsuccessful due to the lack of organisation as the result of the attack of thirty Polish planes. In reality we were only eight – five bombers and three fighter jets.

Capt. Merian Caldwell Cooper, one of the commanders of Kościuszko's 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron comprising, inter alia, US volunteer pilots.



Members of the Interallied Mission to Poland, August 1920. First row from the left: Lord Edgar Vincent D'Abernon, Jean Jules Jusserand, Gen. Maxime Weygand, Maurice Hankey (public domain)

Commander in Chief Józef Piłsudski decorating officers with the Virtuti Militari 5<sup>th</sup>-class cross. From left: Gen. Tadeusz Rozwadowski, Gen. Stanisław Haller, Col. Tadeusz Piskor, Col. Cedric Erald Fauntleroy – commander of Kościuszko's 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron (NAC)



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On 14 August 1920 the 5<sup>th</sup> Army of Gen. Władysław Sikorski launched its counteroffensive by the Vistula and Wkra toward Zegrz and Nasielsk, and subsequently toward Ciechanów. On 15 August the 203<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Ulhan Regiment, during the march to Ciechanów, dispersed the 4<sup>th</sup> Bolshevik Army and destroyed its radio station, cutting off contact between the 4<sup>th</sup> Army and the command at the Western Front. This helped Gen. Sikorski's army, supported by tanks and armoured vehicles, to break down the right wing of the Western Front (Ciechanów and Mława were retaken). On 16 August of 1920, the manoeuvring group of Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Gen. Edward Rydz-Śmigły launched its counteroffensive from the Wieprz River toward the north, entering the gap in the Soviet group supervised by the so-called Mazyr Group. On 17 August 1920 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Task Force from Wesoła near Warsaw launched an attack on Minsk Mazowiecki. The counteroffensive surprised the Soviet commanders, and their formations retreated fearfully toward the north and east.

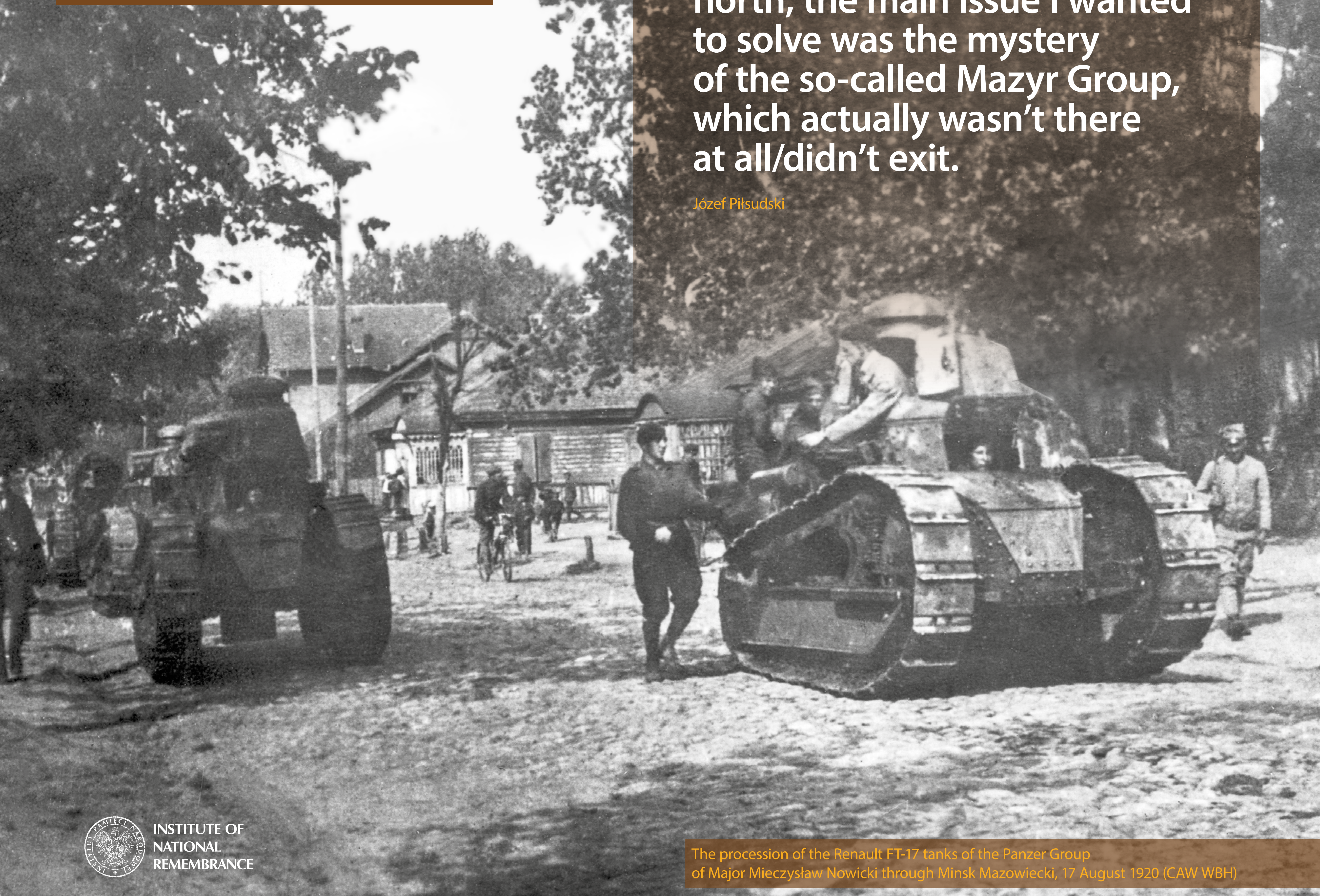
# THE VICTORIOUS COUNTEROFFENSIVE

I launched an attack on 16 August, if you can even call it an attack. I spent all day in the car generally by the left-wing 14<sup>th</sup> Division collecting data and noting my impressions, as well as those of my subordinates. I cannot refute the fact that, that evening, when all of the divisions had run a good 30 km north, the main issue I wanted to solve was the mystery of the so-called Mazyr Group, which actually wasn't there at all/didn't exit.

Józef Piłsudski



Józef Piłsudski in the vehicle from which he led the counteroffensive by the Wieprz River, 16-26 August 1920 (NAC)



The procession of the Renault FT-17 tanks of the Panzer Group of Major Mieczysław Nowicki through Minsk Mazowiecki, 17 August 1920 (CAW WBH)



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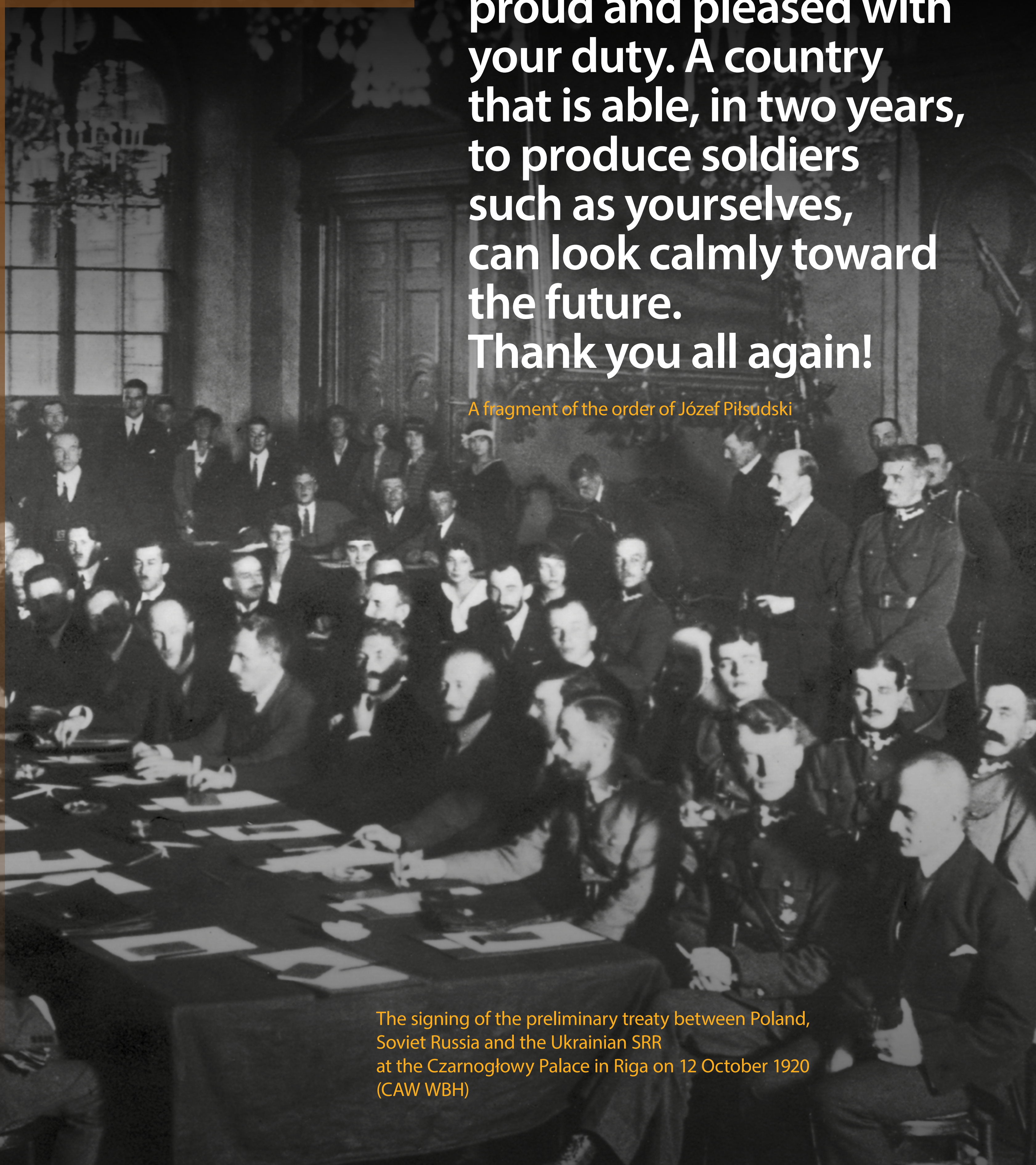
# FINAL BATTLES AND THE TREATY OF RIGA

Poland's victorious counteroffensive in August 1920 gave rise to the breakdown of the offensive of the Soviet forces. The First Cavalry Army, commandeered by Siemion Buddiony, heading to L'viv in mid-August 1920 was redirected too late in the direction of the Polish detachments hitting/attacking over the Wieprz River. On 31 August 1920 by Komarowo, where the final great cavalry battle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place, the "horse-army" was broken down by the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division of Col. Juliusz Rómmel. In mid-August the Polish front headed east and its key goal became the breaking down of the Soviet forces grouped along the line of the Niemen River. After heavy battles, on 25 August 1920, the Poles conquered Grodno, after which the Polish Task Force set off to Lida, to chase their enemy. The 1<sup>st</sup> Legions' Infantry Division took over Lida on 27 September 1920, and the Soviet army definitively retreated to the east. On 12 October 1920 the Polish Army entered Minsk and, that same day, the cease-fire was signed in Riga, which was formally binding from 18 October 1920.

The peace treaty between Poland and Bolshevik Russia, signed on 18 March 1921 in Riga, stipulated the route of the borders between Poland and the USSR: along the Daugava in the north-east and the Zbruch in the south. Poland gained Nowogródyczyna, Polesie, Wołyń and western Podole. The Bolshevik government undertook to pay compensation in the amount of 30 million rubles and return stolen artwork. Both parties forfeited any and all territorial claims.

**S**oldiers!  
You have made Poland strong, sure of itself and free. You can be proud and pleased with your duty. A country that is able, in two years, to produce soldiers such as yourselves, can look calmly toward the future.  
Thank you all again!

A fragment of the order of Józef Piłsudski



The signing of the preliminary treaty between Poland, Soviet Russia and the Ukrainian SRR at the Czarnogłowy Palace in Riga on 12 October 1920 (CAW WBH)



The painting titled *The Battle of Komarów* by Jerzy Kossak. In the battle of 31 August 1920 the Polish cavalry conquered The First Cavalry Army, commandeered by Siemion Buddiony (Polish Army Museum)



The Polish cavalry marching to Lida, September 1920 (CAW WBH)



Major Wincenty Kowalski (second from left), commander of the Second Battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Legions' Infantry Regiment, observing the course of the battle of Lida. Visible also are the soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Regiment and the 5<sup>th</sup> Legions' Infantry Regiment, 28 September 1920. (CAW WBH)



# THE FORCES AND LOSSES OF THE POLISH AND BOLSHEVIK FORMATIONS

PARTICIPATING IN THE BATTLE OF WARSAW  
IN AUGUST OF 1920

## POLISH FORCES:

approx. **121,000** soldiers of the infantry and artillery  
approx. **9,300** cavalry soldiers  
approx. **60,000** Volunteer Army soldiers  
approx. **1,900** machine guns  
**664** cannons  
**49** tanks  
**9** armoured vehicles  
**40** aircraft  
approx. **10** armoured trains

## THE BOLSHEVIK FORCES:

approx. **125,000** infantry soldiers  
approx. **7,500** cavalry soldiers  
**2,600** machine guns  
**600** cannons

## LOSSES

## POLISH SIDE:

**4,500** killed  
approx. **22,000** injured  
**10,000** missing

Polish losses in August 1920 constituted approximately **20 PERCENT** of all losses of the Polish Army in the period from November 1918 to December 1920.

## THE SOVIET SIDE:

**25,000** killed  
**60,000** in captivity  
approx. **30-45 THOUSAND** interned  
by the Germans in Eastern Prussia

Loss of over **66 PERCENT** of the headcount of the Tukhachevsky front from the headcount as for 1 August 1920.



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