

Part II

THE RESURRECTION AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE POLISH STATE

Rydz-Śmigły in the Maelstrom of Polish Politics

A Regency Council dominated by the Endeks and led by Józef Świerzyński* met in Warsaw on October 23, 1918. The war ministry was reserved for Piłsudski who was still incarcerated in Magdeburg. In his absence, Rydz was entrusted with military matters. The prospect of assuming command of the Polnische Wehrmacht was so tempting that he hastened to Warsaw to engage in negotiations for its transfer to Polish command.¹ Bogusław Miedziński recalled:

We prepared his lodgings in a boarding house at 4 Moniuszko Street where I was living at the time. Upon arriving at the train station to meet him, I failed to spot him among the alighting passengers. Suddenly someone whom I did not recognize was tugging at my sleeve and started talking to me. It was Śmigły, who had shaved his head prior to his trip to Kiev and was thus difficult to distinguish...²

Details of Rydz's role in the Świerzyński government are unknown. It is very likely that it would have welcomed a man of Rydz's stature into its ranks. He enjoyed the support of the major political parties, the Legionnaires, the POW, and Polish forces which had previously operated in Byelorussia under General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki, all of which recognized

* Józef Świerzyński (1868-1948), also spelled "Świeżyński," was an Endek politician who had served as a deputy in all four Russian Dumas.

the POW commander as the chief military authority in the central command of the Polish armed forces now forming in Lublin.

Henryk Jabłoński* argued that the Świerzyński government's invitation to Rydz was an attempt to broaden its political base beyond the Endeks.³ Bogusław Miedziński, an adviser to Rydz at the time, offered a different interpretation of this development in his 1976 memoirs, recounting that

the political deliberations alternated between two paths: Świerzyński and his adherents under the banner of Roman Dmowski together with the left wing of the independence movement, and simultaneous, but secret negotiations between Rydz and the representatives of the Polish National Committee.⁴

Negotiations between Świerzyński and the independence left were inconclusive. The Endeks proposed to the representatives of the independence left that they assume positions as ministers without portfolio. The office of the undersecretary of the Ministry of War did not afford de facto power over the army—without the support of at least some of the ministers. According to Rydz, this could only be guaranteed by representatives of the leftist parties. Miedziński thought that Rydz demonstrated inadequate

* Historian Henryk Jabłoński (1909-2003) served as president of communist Poland (1972-1985).

comprehension of the political issues involved during his discussions with the Endeks. But since he had a military force at his disposal, the POW, he had the potential of emerging as an arbitrator between the parties, and not only of representing the executive of one of the above.

Rydz's status at this time seemed to reveal a dual meaning. Despite the lack of compromise between the Endeks and the left independents, he maintained contact with the Świerzyński government, but decidedly refused cooperation when it issued the decree of October 27, 1918 on military conscription. Rydz probably feared a potential decline in the influence of the POW within the army's ranks. As a counterweight, he announced the mobilization of the POW on November 1 in conjunction with the withdrawal of Austro-Hungarian forces, having received news of the impending collapse of the Habsburg monarchy.

The conflicts within the Świerzyński government compelled Rydz to foresee a different course of political events. Thinking that the independence left would break away and form its own government separate from the Regency Council, he feared that the Council would use the opportunity to use the military forces at its disposal to strengthen its position in the wake of the retreating Austro-Hungarians.

The representatives of the independence left and the POW met in the Warsaw home of Artur Śliwiński,* and the matters of discussion were revealed in the account of one of its participants, Gabriel Dubiel.↓ He recalled that the attendees were primarily "...people from the Congress Kingdom, independence advocates, Socialist Party (PPS) members, soldiers, and Rydz-Śmigły, who had recently been appointed by the Regency Council." Dubiel erred in recounting Rydz's status, as he still held the rank of colonel at the time. Farther along he recalled the following:

Rydz-Śmigły called the meeting to order, declaring the need for the creation of a provisional democratic-republican government in the face of the surrender and withdrawal of the occupational forces, and the necessity of maintaining order at this critical moment when the imminent threat of anarchy lurked, meanwhile appealing to the working class and peasant masses to back the nascent Polish state.⁵

Rydz then stipulated that the government be temporary, pending the arrival of Piłsudski from Magdeburg, with Lublin as its location since a Legionary regiment was reportedly to

* Artur Śliwiński (1877-1953) had presided over the National Central Committee (*Centralny Komitet Narodowy*), an umbrella organization of Polish political parties operating in the former Congress Kingdom advocating independence formed in Warsaw in 1915. Prior to dissolving two years later, the Committee was the primary force behind the creation of the Provisional State Council (*Tymczasowa Rada Stanu*). Śliwiński later briefly served as prime minister of Poland in 1922.

↓ Gabriel Dubiel (1880-1943) was a journalist, historian, and Peasant Party activist. He later served as minister of education in Daszyński's provisional government, and as a deputy in the Sejm (parliament) (1922-1927). Later apprehended by the Germans, he perished in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

be situated there as the Austro-Hungarians withdrew.

Although he dwelled on the necessity of forming an army and defending the new country's frontiers, Rydz remained silent about the socioeconomic goals of the new government, leaving this formidable task to others. Rydz's overall plan was then accepted without any objections.

The assembly of the government in Lublin and its proclamation of Polish independence, as recalled by POW and PPS adherent Marian Wojtek-Malinowski,* largely grew out of POW circles in September 1918. He was apprised of this by Adam Koc, the POW commander in the areas still occupied by the Germans.

Rydz arrived in Lublin on November 3, by which time the Austro-Hungarians had withdrawn. The governor general, Anton Lipscak, had transferred control to representatives of the Regency Council. The POW forces in Lublin were disorganized, compelling Rydz to order a general mobilization. All of the Legionaries and POW forces in the area were ordered to report for duty to specific points no later than 10 p.m. the following day with the goal of undermining the influence of the Regency Council in the vicinity as best as possible.⁶

* Marian Wojtek-Malinowski (1876-1948) Socialist Party member who had served several prison terms for nationalist activities. He later served as a deputy in the Sejm and the Senate, fleeing to Romania in September, 1939, where he was interned. He returned to Poland after the Second World War, living for a time under an assumed name.

Having been apprised of this scheme, the Council's plenipotentiary, Juliusz Zdanowski,* was determined to thwart it while attempting to bring Rydz over to his side. The two men came to an agreement in which Rydz assumed the leadership of Polish military forces, including POW adherents, on the lands formerly occupied by the Austro-Hungarians in exchange for swearing allegiance to the Regency Council and the Świerzyński government. After protracted negotiations an agreement was concluded on the condition that Rydz's appointment be subject to approval by the general staff in Warsaw.

Despite his action, Rydz had still not given up on his aim for a government composed of representatives of the independence left. His newly acquired status had provided him with even greater potential influence. His hopes to organize an army which could assist the POW in disarming the Germans were aborted on November 5 with the sudden appearance of General Tadeusz Rozwadowski,↓ the chief of the general

* Juliusz Zdanowski (1874-1937) was an Endek activist from a prominent landowning family. Serving as a senator following Polish independence, he largely withdrew from public life following Piłsudski's May, 1926 coup d'état.

↓ Tadeusz Rozwadowski (1866-1928) had a distinguished career in the Austro-Hungarian army following academy training. He later served in military operations against the Ukrainians in Lvov, and achieved special recognition as chief of staff for drawing up the plans for the Polish counterattack against the Red Army which decided the outcome of the Polish-Soviet War. During Piłsudski's May, 1926 coup d'état, he remained (continued on next page)

staff, who ordered some changes in personnel. General Bolesław Olszewski was appointed commander of the Lublin district and a meeting was summoned which included his chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Stefan Pasławski,* Rydz, Burhardt-Bukacki and Norwid-Neugebauer. Rydz was given the responsibility of creating a brigade composed of former POW forces in the Lublin area, and ordered to advance against the Ukrainians in Hrubieszów.

Rydz's sudden demotion was probably motivated by a lack of trust within the conservative representatives in the government, who would not condone military usurpation of the Regency Council's authority. This sudden reversal in fortune prompted Rydz to meet with representatives of the parties of the independence left that same day in order to express his desire for the immediate appointment of a popular government. He only requested that he be given two days to gather the POW forces scattered throughout the province.

loyal to President Wojciechowski. Having long since resigned from his position as chief of staff, he was nevertheless incarcerated, but released shortly before his death.

* Bolesław Olszewski (1858-1944) had served in the Russian army and with the Riflemen. He held a variety of military posts in the Polish army. Following his retirement from active duty in 1924, he served for one year as a provincial governor.

Stefan Pasławski (1885-1956) served in the Austro-Hungarian army and the Legions. Following Polish independence, he served in the Border Patrol Corps (*Korpus Ochrony Pogranicza*) or KOP, and as governor of both Białystok (1934-1936) and Stanisławów (1936-1939) provinces. During the September, 1939 campaign, he fled into exile, and died in Britain.

On November 6 and 7, the Provisional Government of the Polish People's Republic (*Tymczasowy Rząd Ludowy Republiki Polskiej*) led by Ignacy Daszyński* was proclaimed. This new government bestowed upon Rydz the rank of general and appointed him its minister of war and supreme commander of all Polish military forces pending Piłsudski's anticipated return.⁷

Following a secret session with Miedziński, Rydz placed POW detachments in a state of readiness, positioning them strategically throughout the city. A battalion sent by the Regency Council to oppose the new government was outmaneuvered and accordingly defected to Rydz. During the evening delegates and representatives of the Regency Council were arrested. By morning all of the military forces in the region were secured. A celebration was proclaimed whose participants included the municipal police force, militia forces affiliated with the political parties, and remnants of Dowbor-Muśnicki's army and the Polnische Wehrmacht. Workers also marched in formation singing revolutionary songs. Rydz

* Ignacy Daszyński (1866-1936) was a PPS member and longtime supporter of Piłsudski. Having served in the Austro-Hungarian parliament and Cracow's city council, he served in the Sejm both as vice marshal (1922-1928) and marshal (1928-1930), where he exploited his oratorical skills. He established a university designed specifically for students from a working class background in 1922. He retired from politics in 1931 due to ill health.

made a speech appealing to all Polish soldiers to mobilize, regardless of who their previous masters had been.⁸

Rydz wanted to create an army on the territory formerly occupied by the Austro-Hungarians as rapidly as possible. With this in mind, he ordered the dissolution of the POW and the subordination of its ranks to the war ministry. POW forces operating in western Galicia were thus incorporated directly into the army. However in eastern Galicia, the Ukraine, and lands occupied by the Germans in the Congress Kingdom the structure of the POW remained unchanged. Although made directly subordinate to the general staff of the Polish Army, a special POW bureau was created to deal with its affairs.

By disbanding the POW, Rydz deprived himself of the same important trump card which had determined his political stature. He most likely concluded that he wielded so much influence within the army that he had little fear of losing his position. Even though the Lublin government, now led by Janusz Pajewski, hardly exercised control beyond Lublin itself, Rydz was determined to subordinate the numerous provisional Polish institutions to Lublin's authority, especially the Polish Liquidation Commission (*Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna*) in Cracow. Accordingly Rydz dispatched a

letter to Brigadier General Bolesław Roja,* commander of Polish military forces in Cracow, ordering him to recognize Pajewski's regime.

Roja defied the order, instead proclaiming his loyalty to Piłsudski.⁹ Thus the soldiers upon whom Rydz was depending suddenly were not at his disposal, frustrating his plans to occupy the territory under German control at the time. Nevertheless, in light of the revolution emerging in Germany, the ensuing rapid course of events hastened a decision concerning the disarmament of the remaining German military forces. Fate was to relieve Rydz of responsibility for this task with Piłsudski's unexpected release from Magdeburg on November 10. At about noon on that day, Miedziński received a telephone call from Warsaw apprising him of Piłsudski's impending arrival. Rydz immediately dispatched an emissary to Warsaw. At 1 p.m. on the following day, Miedziński submitted a statement from Rydz to Piłsudski. Much to the emissary's astonishment, Piłsudski received him coldly, even failing to shake his hand. In the course of the ensuing discussion, Piłsudski tersely queried: "Why have you

* Bolesław Roja (1876-1940) had served in the Legions. After serving in various military posts following independence, he was later elected to the Sejm, where he became an opponent of Piłsudski and the Sanacja regime. Active in the Polish underground during the Second World War, he was apprehended by the Germans, and subsequently perished in Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

tied my hands by collaborating with this government in Lublin? You have deprived me of a strong position to negotiate just when I needed it most."¹⁰ He then proceeded to ask a string of questions which reflected suspicions of Rydz's loyalty. Miedziński reassured him that Rydz and the entire POW were ready to submit to Piłsudski's authority. Nevertheless Piłsudski ignored Miedziński's request for orders to convey to Rydz, instead ordering Miedziński to remain in Warsaw and summoning Rydz to the capital.

Piłsudski received Rydz on November 12 and a discussion ensued for over half an hour. Although Rydz limited his report to the mobilization of Polish military forces in territory formerly under Austro-Hungarian occupation, Piłsudski proceeded to assign him broader authority beyond this realm. Rydz left the meeting with the command of the entire Lublin region and orders to proceed there immediately. Miedziński then met with Sosnkowski, assuring him of Rydz's substantial role in maintaining Piłsudski's influence during the commander's internment in Magdeburg and adding that Rydz could have easily been offended being treated with such lack of trust.

Sosnkowski mollified Miedziński's apprehension with the following words:

Śmigły and ambition... There is no one for whom ambition could be so foreign. As for politics, they never seem to have interested him. If they have been imposed upon him recently, I am certain that he would breath a sigh of relief to take leave of them.¹¹

On November 11 Piłsudski presided over a meeting of the Provisional Government at 51 Mokotowski Street at which he demanded its dissolution. This met with fierce opposition from Daszyński and his supporters.¹² Piłsudski then proceeded to take advantage of the situation by asking Rydz where his loyalties lay. When Rydz proclaimed his allegiance to Piłsudski, Daszyński was deprived of support from the military and was forced to back down. The Provisional Government was then abolished and all of its decrees were simultaneously nullified.

Rydz departed for Lublin that same day. Although his participation in the Provisional Government had an influence on his later career, Piłsudski seems to have been impressed primarily with Rydz's military abilities, as Rydz was never given any political role until Piłsudski's death. Rydz's new assignment in Lublin hardly lowered his status within the military establishment. The Lublin region was strategically important during the crucial final months of 1918 in light of the emerging conflict with the Ukrainians over the eastern borderlands.

Upon his return to Lublin, Rydz displayed a semblance of composure although he actually was very ill at ease, having found himself in an awkward situation. The Provisional Government had assigned him the rank of general, a promotion which Piłsudski had never officially recognized. Thus Rydz wore a uniform without insignia and abstained from making reference to any rank when signing orders.¹³ To a military officer such a situation is exceedingly difficult and causes numerous frustrations. As minister of war in the Provisional Government, he had promoted a number of officers, whose status was now uncertain with the Government's demise. Piłsudski soon resolved this dilemma by recognizing Rydz's rank and all of the promotions.* Rydz then immersed himself in the arduous, stressful, and time-consuming task of reorganizing the forces under his command: restoring order, establishing his authority and assigning responsibilities to officers from staff to field level.¹⁴ By December 22, Piłsudski had promoted him commander of the Warsaw region,¹⁵ thus demonstrating not only his faith in Rydz's competence by investing him with the defense of the capital, but also

* Since Generals Roja and Haller had also made similar promotions which were also recognized at this time, Piłsudski's action can hardly be considered unique toward Rydz-Śmigły.

reflecting a restoration of trust following all of the skepticism only a few weeks before.

The Volhynian Campaign and the Struggle for Vilnius

Piłsudski surmised that the western frontier of the new Polish state would be a matter resolved by the victorious Allied powers at the conference in Paris. However, on the eastern frontier, he hoped to secure his political objectives by *fait accompli*, exploiting the political vacuum caused by revolutionary upheaval in Russia. He recognized the necessity of forming a political entity in central Europe capable of withstanding both the Germans and the Russians. The nucleus of such a federation would be Poland, and include the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, and possibly other countries on the Baltic. The realization of such a plan encountered many obstacles from the beginning, being incompatible with the national aspirations of the Ukrainians and the Lithuanians. Although various tendencies were prevalent among these peoples, including pro-Soviet and pro-independence movements, pro-Polish inclinations were few and far between. The Byelorussian population had yet to demonstrate a distinct national character, while the widespread poverty which pervaded there encouraged an appeal for the rhetoric of the revolutionaries in Russia. Polish

aspirations, on the other hand, appeared to possess a domineering nature.

Piłsudski's ambitions also clashed with the new Soviet government now in power, which sought to broaden its ideological influence in the disputed lands, while Britain, France, and the United States envisioned them as part of the future Russian state following the victory of the White forces which they were sponsoring at the time.

Conflict had already resumed in the vicinity of Równy and Sarny in December 1918 with the army of Dnieper Ukraine, which had encroached upon Volhynia and Polesie and were advancing toward the Bug River by the end of the month.*

In late January and early February 1919, Rydz assumed command from General Stefan Majewski[↓] of the Polish operational group *Kowel* active in Volhynia and Polesie. Initially numbering 2000, this force soon expanded to 5000 soldiers. It was assigned a defensive line commencing at Hrubieszów through Włodzimierz Wołyński along the Stochód River as far as Maniewiczze.¹⁶ The forces under his command included eight infantry battalions, one artillery unit, and

* This military force was nominally loyal to the Ukrainian National Republic, also known as the Directory, which had established itself in Kiev upon the withdrawal of the German army.

↓ Stefan Majewski (1867-1944) was educated in the Military Technical Academy in Vienna. Following various command posts during the First World War, he served mostly as a staff officer and military educator during the early 1920s before retiring in 1926.

one air squadron. Halting the Ukrainian advance would be difficult, as the front was extensive in light of the available military forces. Rydz proved very much up to the task. Włodzimierz Wołyński and Kowel were occupied by early February, followed by a successful advance to the Stochód. Here he stopped, since additional soldiers and materiel could not be raised. Despite their numerical superiority, the Dnieper Ukrainians likewise were forced to limit their activities in the area since they were also engaged in combat with the Red Army.

Rydz remained in Volhynia until being transferred on Piłsudski's orders in April to a new command in the northeast, where an advance upon Vilnius was anticipated.¹⁷ Poland had been struggling with Lithuanian and Soviet forces since the beginning of 1919. With encouragement from Warsaw, irregular Polish forces had captured Vilnius on January 1, only to be driven out by the Red Army five days later, after which the Provisional Worker-Peasant Lithuanian Soviet Republic was proclaimed. On February 5, Poland concluded an agreement with Germany in Białystok stipulating terms for the withdrawal of German forces from the area followed by immediate Polish occupation, thus setting the stage for conflict between Poland and the Soviet Union.

An operational group under the command of General Stanisław Szeptycki strengthened by units from the army of General Listowski was chosen for the offensive on Vilnius.* The 1st and 2nd Legionary Infantry divisions were created and battalions from the 1st Cavalry Brigade were brought to the front. Mobilization was completed by April 15, and nine cavalry battalions and a mounted artillery platoon under the command of Colonel Władysław Belina-Prażmowski[↓] commenced the march toward Vilnius. Forces under the command of General Józef Lasocki[↑] compiled from troops formerly stationed along the Niemen River and detachments of the 2nd Legionary Infantry division attacked Lida. In Belina's rear, Rydz commanded three battalions, one infantry regiment and two

* Stanisław Szeptycki (1867-1950) attained the rank of colonel in the Austro-Hungarian army. Following service as a commander in the Legions, he assumed leadership of the German-sponsored Polnische Wehrmacht, later serving as Austro-Hungarian governor-general of Lublin, a position from which he later resigned in protest. After service in the Polish-Soviet War, he served as minister of military affairs in 1923. An Endek adversary of Piłsudski, he was dismissed from active service following the coup d'état of May 1926. He headed the Polish Red Cross from 1945 to 1950.

Antoni Listowski (1865-1927) had served in the Russian army and was a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War. He left the Russian army in December 1917 and transferred his loyalties to independent Poland. Following service in the Polish-Soviet War, he retired in 1921.

[↓] Władysław Belina-Prażmowski (1888-1938) was a member of the ZWC and the Riflemen. During the First World War, he fought in the Legions, and later served in the Polish army following independence. Retiring from military service in 1929, he entered politics, serving as mayor of Cracow (1931-1933) and governor of Lvov (1933-1937).

[↑] Józef Lasocki (1861-1931) served as a cavalry officer in the Austro-Hungarian army on the eastern front during the First World War. Following service in the Polish-Soviet War, he retired in 1921.

artillery units. Rydz's forces advanced in support of Belina from the vicinity of Papiernia, bypassing Lida to the west and the north.

Within the first day of the operation, a whole host of problems had emerged. Stiff Soviet resistance prevented the seizure of Lida. In the meantime Rydz's infantry was effectively separated from Belina's cavalry. Torrential rains caused delays on muddy highways and supply columns could not keep up with the infantry. With the resulting exhaustion among the ranks, Rydz decided to order a halt on April 17 after his request to do so had been approved by Piłsudski.¹⁸ A dispatch from Piłsudski later that evening ordered Rydz to march instead toward Bastuny that same evening. Rydz decided to delay execution of these instructions, anticipating the hardships of a nighttime advance in addition to a shortage of supplies. On the following day he drew up plans for a longer march in the direction of Bieniakonie. By April 18 Belina's cavalry was approaching the outskirts of Vilnius in preparation for an assault on the city. But despite the many hardships Rydz's soldiers had encountered, they managed to reach the city by the night of April 20-21. Rydz recalled events as follows:

At the end of our strenuous march, night had already fallen as we approached the first house in Vilnius. The soldiers were collapsing from exhaustion. I sat down in

front of a house by the roadside and awaited an officer who was supposed to apprise me of Belina's whereabouts.¹⁹

Rydz was encouraged upon receiving further orders instructing him to attack at sunrise. On the morning of April 21 he led a general attack on the Soviet positions. By the afternoon the Red Army withdrew from the city, falling back toward Mejszagola. In conjunction with the operations on Lida and Vilnius, Polish troops captured Nowogródek and Baranowicze. The focal point of the Red Army's "western front" was gravely imperiled, and accordingly the Soviets were determined to re-occupy Vilnius upon receiving reinforcements. Forseeing the impending Red Army offensive, Piłsudski abandoned plans for a Polish attack. On April 25 command of the 1st Legionary Infantry division and Belina's cavalry was transferred to Rydz. Two days later, Piłsudski left Vilnius for Warsaw. Meanwhile Rydz, whose forces were now referred to as Army Group Vilnius, was put under the overall command of General Szeptycki, under whose tutelage the entire Lithuanian-Byelorussian front had fallen.

Rydz knew that the bulk of the Lithuanian division which had been defeated earlier in Vilnius was now to the north of Mejszagola, while other Lithuanian units previously stationed to the northwest of Vilnius were joining them by way of Jewje, bringing with them the division's general staff. Skirmishes

near Niemenczyn revealed a Lithuanian force numbering no more than 300 soldiers. A smattering of Soviet forces was reportedly to the south of Vilnius in Świątniki and Bujwidze, but substantial infantry and artillery units as well as the Soviet division's general staff reportedly were concentrated around Podbrodzie. For the entire eastern front, intelligence inferred that the main concentration of Soviet infantry and artillery was near Soły. Information in Rydz's possession implied that a Soviet offensive would ensue in the form of a convergence on Vilnius from three directions.

In his article "Battle for Vilnius," Adam Przybylski wrote that it was difficult to pinpoint Rydz's primary objective in his encounter with the Russians, as no relevant documents had survived and the written orders which were issued were either specific to an individual situation or simply given verbally at briefings.²⁰ But it is instructive to try and determine his overall aim by analyzing the organization of his forces in conjunction with these specific commands.

From April 25, Polish units facing the paths of the perceived Red Army onslaughts were pulled back and regrouped in the hope of slowing a Soviet attack. These detachments consisted of an infantry battalion facing Vilnius and Lida with attack potential, and half of an infantry battalion and

a cavalry unit facing the other two directions, where a potential enemy advance was considered less threatening. It is reasonable to assume that about half of Army Group Vilnius's numbers were in the city itself, and conceivably could be used in any direction at any time. If one adds the lack of any orders to fortify the city or withdraw, one can come to the conclusion that Rydz wanted to hold Vilnius by outmaneuvering the enemy. He was hoping to defeat each Soviet onslaught individually and prevent any coordination among the three enemy armies by using a combination of delaying and offensive tactics.

By April 23, the defensive units had already engaged the enemy in Niemenczyn. Red Army maneuvers in this sector indicated an imminent attack on Vilnius, and a counterattack was ordered. By the following day two infantry companies and one artillery unit under Captain Parczyński* had been dispatched and a battalion was diverted by rail to Bezdany on April 27. The combined force fell under the command of Stefan Dąb-Biernacki.↓ Rydz depended on this army to defeat

* Parczyński was later killed in action.

↓ Stefan Dąb-Biernacki (1890-1959) served in the POW and Legions. He was one of the officers interned during the Oath Crisis. Following the Polish-Soviet War, he served in military posts primarily in Vilnius. He fled to France following the outbreak of the Second World War, but was charged with abandoning his troops during the September 1939 campaign. Jailed by the Polish government-in-exile, he was released in 1943 and eventually settled in Britain.

the Soviets in the vicinity of Niemenczyn, then clear the southern bank of the Wilia River and secure this area from Sużany and Podbrodzie. A portion of Dąb-Biernacki's army was then to fall upon Vilnius. At first encountering little opposition, the Poles suddenly met stiffer resistance upon reaching Parczew on the night of April 28 as the Soviets were withdrawing northward. By the following day, intelligence had confirmed that the Red Army was nowhere to be found within a twenty mile radius of Podbrodzie, thus indicating that an attack from the northeast would not materialize.

However other Soviet forces were posing a threat from the east and southeast. Rydz had received word on April 26 and 27 that Soviet infantry and artillery units were organizing in Oszmiania and Kienia. The Red Army attacked on the afternoon of April 28, clearly intending to outflank Vilnius from the south, thus cutting the city's link to Lida. Furthermore, the Red Army group attacking from the northwest simultaneously took the offensive, dislodging Polish cavalry forces in Mejszagóła. Vilnius was clearly in danger, and Rydz counterattacked with eight infantry companies, two cavalry battalions, and 2½ artillery units.²¹ Committing any additional forces proved impossible, since the remainder was necessary for military operations within the city.

The engagement of almost all available forces presented a

major risk, since it left their commander without any reserves at a time when the arrival of enemy forces upon Vilnius from Mejszagola was anticipated.

Following receipt of reports of Soviet movement from the east, Rydz ordered a transfer of Polish troops from the defensive units in the southeast on the evening of April 27. On the following evening, Dab-Biernacki was ordered to leave two companies behind in Niemenczyn and to advance with the rest of his forces to Vilnius. Rydz then approached the front commander, General Szeptycki, for assistance. Szeptycki obliged, making one battalion from the 3rd Legionary Infantry Regiment available to Rydz. At daybreak on April 29 still another battalion from the 6th Legionary Infantry Regiment was to advance from Lida and General Szeptycki ordered the dispatch of two companies and an artillery platoon from the vicinity of Ejszyszki to advance through Jaszuny toward Rudomino.

It will be remembered that the 1st Cavalry Regiment in Mejszagola had been defeated on April 28, and Soviet infantry and artillery were rapidly advancing on its coattails. By the following evening frontline Soviet troops had appeared several kilometers northwest of Vilnius. At the time Rydz had five infantry companies at his immediate disposition, a portion of which had been assigned guard duty, one cavalry

battalion and half of an artillery unit, while the bulk of his forces were in the eastern sector. Dąb-Biernacki's troops from Podbrodzie had yet to arrive. Faced with this situation, Rydz ordered his army to dig in within the city, thus allowing him to prepare forces which would be needed for a counterattack. These units had been weakened and were thus hardly a match for the approaching Red Army. During the night the Soviets penetrated Polish defenses, but, not being familiar with the city, they were forced to delay an attack until morning.

Rydz managed to organize some soldiers from the 2nd Battalion of the 6th Legionary Infantry Regiment, which had arrived during the night. Rydz also recalled some units from Niemenczyn, but limited transfers from the eastern sector to only three companies, revealing the importance with which he measured that area of operations.

The Soviet offensive in the early morning of April 30 encountered stiff resistance from the 2nd Battalion of the 6th Legionary Infantry Regiment. At 9:30, Rydz organized an attack force under the command of Captain Parczyński which engaged in a flanking operation from the eastern part of the city against the advancing enemy, while one company from the 2nd Battalion advanced together with four platoons from Nowosiółek.

By April 30, it was clear that the Soviet plan for recapturing Vilnius was failing. Enemy forces in Podbrodzie had been defeated two days earlier and were forced to withdraw to the vicinity of Święciany. The Soviet army in the north was retreating toward Mejszagoła and Podbrodzie, while the eastern army remained stationary and inactive. Meanwhile, Rydz's Army Group Vilnius had increased in size by thirteen companies.

Rydz took the opportunity to reorganize his forces on May 1 and distribute them as follows:

- the eastern army: 12 companies, 1½ artillery units, 4 cavalry battalions on the flanks near Rudomino and Bezdany;

- the northeastern army: two companies in the Podbrodzie-Paśniki region;

- the northwestern army, divided into two groups: the right (four companies and an artillery platoon), and the left (four companies and an artillery unit, plus one cavalry battalion on the left flank);

- the western army: which retained its two infantry companies near Nowe Troki (Trakai) and one cavalry battalion in Jewje.

- two infantry companies customarily designated to defend lines of communication;

-a reserve force in Vilnius comprised of sixteen companies, two cavalry battalions, and 2½ artillery units.

Rydz divided up his forces in such a way in order to proceed on the offensive and defeat enemy forces in the northwest and east. On April 30 he ordered the creation of two separate groups to proceed toward Mejszagoła, one of which fell under the command of Dąb-Biernacki and consisting of one company from the 5th Legionary Infantry Regiment and one artillery unit. While this force was assigned the capture of the city itself, the second group under Captain Włodzimierz Bochenek, consisting of the 2nd Battalion from the 6th Legionary Infantry Regiment and an artillery platoon, was dispatched toward Podberezie. After gnawing away at Soviet forces near Rzesza, Bochenek overran Pikiliszki on May 1. Dąb-Biernacki reached Mejszagoła on the same day, but failed to take the city after some of his soldiers from the Poznań Battalion had panicked. Upon hearing of this reversal, Rydz sent an additional two companies from Vilnius which Dąb-Biernacki dispatched toward Korwie, while he himself rallied the Poznań battalion to march toward Mejszagoła, which was finally occupied on the evening of May 2. Meanwhile Bochenek captured Podberezie on the same day, where he subsequently transferred an entire battalion.

Thus the Polish thrust toward the northwest successfully ended. Rydz recalled Dąb-Biernacki together with two of his infantry companies and one artillery platoon back to Vilnius. Units in the vicinity of Mejszagola and Podberezie were ordered to hold and not attempt to advance.

In the meantime the eastern army had remained in place until Rydz ordered a general advance toward a line encompassing Miedniki, Kiena, and Mickuny. The main thrust was to come on the right flank. The Polish forces were thus distributed as follows:

- four companies under the command of Captain Bortnowski
- the Suwałki Infantry Regiment, which consisted of six companies backed by 2½ artillery units, charged with establishing a front between Miedniki and Kosina Wilka;

- four companies and one artillery unit under Captain Zborowski which was to advance along the Vilnius-Werbuszki road and capture Kiena Station;

- four companies and an artillery platoon under Captain Hozer assigned with seizing Skajstery and Mickuny.

The attack force on the left flank was an irregular cavalry unit in Bezdany which was also providing reconnaissance about the situation to the east and northeast toward the Kowale-Słoboda area.

The Polish offensive commenced on the morning of May 3 under the immediate command of Major Mackiewicz with Rydz present at the front. In the course of the day, Captain Bortnowski and the Suwałki Regiment advanced to a line encompassing Zakieńce, Krzyżówka, and Oszmianka. Meanwhile Zborowski's forces reached a line stretching from Kosina and Kienia Station, while Hozer occupied Skajstery and Mickuny. On the next day, Bortnowski captured Miedniki and the Suwałki Regiment overran Wielka Kosina and Mała Kosina, while the 11th Uhlan Regiment reached the Słoboda-Miedniki area.

The Soviets were also threatened from the south by the 7th Uhlan Regiment operating with the Polish forces around Lida, and were forced to retreat to the vicinity of Soły. This proved fortuitous for the Poles, for it enabled them to transfer units to the northeast, where the Red Army had launched an offensive.

Rydz left only two infantry battalions, 1½ field artillery units, and a platoon of mounted artillery and two cavalry battalions on the eastern front, placing them under the command of Captain Zborowski. The Suwałki Regiment was recalled to Vilnius, and one battalion from the 5th Legionary Infantry Regiment together with one artillery platoon departed for Bezdany on May 5. Zborowski's troops overran

Soły on May 7 and established contact with the 7th Uhlan Regiment near Oszmiana.

Major Dąb-Bieracki's two companies, stationed in Podbrodzie since April 29, had encountered the Soviets on May 1, but were forced to withdraw toward Niemenczyn. By May 4, the Soviet attack was so formidable, that Dąb-Biernacki was forced to pull back to the southern bank of the Wilia River. On May 5, Rydz ordered a counterattack in this field of operations. By nightfall, Dąb-Biernacki's forces had concentrated near Bezdany. A portion of the 5th Legionary Infantry Regiment, previously withdrawn from the northwestern and eastern sectors, was placed under his command, bringing the total to five companies and an artillery platoon. This force was assigned the task of attacking the Soviets from the east on their left flank and rear in the area near Niemenczyn. On their left flank, the Poles used units from the northwestern sector, namely five companies from the 6th Legionary Infantry Regiment backed by artillery. Following some initial setbacks, Polish forces occupied Podbrodzie on May 7. This victory, combined with the retreat of Soviet forces operating in the northeastern sector toward Świąciany allowed Rydz at last to seize the initiative.

Rydz assessed the military situation in a letter dispatched to Piłsudski on May 9.

...The Soviet commanders perceived that the (Polish) attack from the southeast and the north, namely from Mejszagola-Podberezie, was the main Polish thrust converging in Vilnius. The final attack from Dyneberg was undertaken as a coup d'grace, employing the best Soviet forces available for the specific purpose of retaking Vilnius. On the whole the plan was faultless, but it failed in its execution due to its timing. Since the (Soviet) offensive in the north was delayed by one day, this allowed me to defeat each individual Soviet attack by quickly transferring soldiers between each area of operation. This was my deliverance, and I believe that it was the only way to bring about victory. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of this outcome are as follows:

1. the impossibility of taking advantage of this victory, because it was necessary to withdraw military forces so they could be used elsewhere;
2. fatigue among the soldiers caused by excessive marches and combat, and finally
3. the completely whimsical mixture of tactical units, which while not appearing so debilitating according to regulations, nevertheless presented many undesirable problems.

I could not use the cavalry at my disposal in combat due to its state of exhaustion, thus limiting its role to intelligence gathering and flank defense.²²

While Rydz's Army Group Vilnius was fighting over the city Lithuanians claimed as their capital, events elsewhere on the Lithuanian-Byelorussian front were really governed by the situation around this disputed municipality. Upon receiving word on May 8 of the situation around Vilnius, General Szyptecki assigned General Józef Lasocki responsibility for the defensive line encompassing Krewo, Milejków, Zamojdzie, and Słowińsk, while Rydz was allocated similar duties in Smorgoni. As it now stood, the entire Lithuanian-Byelorussian front, with the exception of the left

flank, was located upon a line of German trenches remaining from the First World War.

The Struggle for Dyneburg

Occupation of the old German trenches marked the end of the Polish offensive. The operational group under Rydz's command was the only Polish force to reach the line encompassing Lake Narocz, Hoduciszki, Ignalino, and Łyngmiany after several skirmishes extending to the middle of May. Yet the cessation of hostilities with the Germans on the Lithuanian-Byelorussian front instantly compelled the need to hold a line for a future offensive against the Red Army. Rydz's forces, backing up the 3rd Galician Infantry Division, attacked toward Połocka in mid-August, forcing a Soviet withdrawal across the Dźwina River. Reaching the river by the end of August, a battle ensued lasting four weeks.

After consolidating his forces from the 1st and 3rd Infantry Division and some cavalry units at his disposal, Rydz prepared for a final blow against the Soviets approaching the northern bank of the Dźwina in mid-September. By September 27, Rydz had forced the Red Army to withdraw across the river to a defensive line in the outskirts of [Dyneburg](#). The 3rd Infantry Division plus some reserve forces penetrated the [Dźwina](#) on a line reaching to [Druja](#). By

engaging these forces, Rydz was also covering his western flank, thus hopefully dissuading a Lithuanian claim to Vilnius.

A military accord was reached between Poland and Latvia on December 30 for the purpose of coordinating offensive action against the Red Army. The operation was given the name *Winter (Zima)*, and Rydz was given full command over the joint operation. On January 3, 1920, two Polish divisions attacked Dyneburg from the south, while Latvian forces attacked from the north. Climactic conditions made for a difficult operation, with temperatures dropping to -25° C, but the thick ice which characterized the Dźwina riverbed served to alleviate the formidable hindrances presented by the terrain.²³

Rydz ordered that the city be attacked simultaneously from several directions. The initiative lay with the Poles, whose morale had remained high since the previous autumn. But Rydz noted in his later writings some of the problems Operation *Zima* involved with emphasis on the alliance with the Latvians. Recalling his own feelings when fighting on the side of the Central Powers, he felt that the operation may have dampened the sense of national purpose and national consciousness among his soldiers even though they were certain of eventual success.²⁴

The conquest of Dyneburg was a difficult task. The Soviet defenders were formidably equipped with machine guns and artillery. On the afternoon of January 3, the Poles had captured the citadel and the railroad station, after which the battle moved to the central portion of the city. The Soviets withdrew toward the northeast. Units from the 1st Infantry Division attacking in a northerly direction near Wyszki and defeating a Soviet relief force heading toward Dyneburg were the first to link up with the Latvians. Through the course of the month of January Rydz's offensive was marked with increasing success. The final stage of the campaign took place under immensely difficult conditions, with temperatures reaching -30° C and snow presenting a chronic hindrance. Nevertheless the offensive was an operational success. Latvian and Polish troops advanced and held a line encompassing Drissa, Lake Oświeja and the Świniucha River. Furthermore the front against the Soviets was shortened considerably. Poland had gained a territorial link with Latvia, and Lithuania was completely cut off from the Soviet Union. The operation in Dyneburg had thwarted the possibility of the Soviets establishing a Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Piłsudski held Rydz in great esteem, lionizing his contribution to the success in Operation Winter, and awarding him the Virtuti Militari in Dyneburg at the end of January.²⁵

The Polish-Soviet War of 1920

In the southeast, a Polish offensive against the Soviet Union commenced on April 25, 1920. Three armies, the 2nd, 3rd, and the 6th, along with the 9th Infantry Division and the 4th Cavalry Brigade, advanced toward the Dnieper River. Two Ukrainian divisions were also employed, a total force of about 4000 soldiers. Rejecting Soviet peace overtures, Piłsudski had decided to seek a military solution to determine Poland's eastern frontier.

The offensive's objective was Kiev, and Piłsudski was to command personally the 3rd Army, which was to bear the heaviest burden in the operation. Rydz was given command of a unit made up of the 1st Legionary Infantry Division, the 7th Infantry Division, and the 3rd Cavalry Battalion. Rydz was ordered to advance toward Żytomierz (Zhitomir) and occupy the city. Piłsudski was confident of success. By the morning of April 26, the Red Army had withdrawn from Żytomierz, and was abandoning the surrounding terrain without a fight. Thus the first stage of the offensive turned out favorably for the Soviets' adversaries, as the Poles advanced into the void.

But this easy victory forced Piłsudski to come to a decision as to which direction to focus his main thrust: toward Kiev, or toward the south against the Soviet 14th Army. After intelligence indicated that the Red Army would defend Kiev, Piłsudski decided to concentrate on the capture of the city.

The attack on Kiev was to be led by Rydz, to whom Piłsudski thence transferred command of the 3rd Army. The 3rd Army was then reorganized as follows: An army group under the command of Colonel Józef Rybak* was assigned the left flank, while the 1st Infantry Division remained in the vicinity of Żytomierz. The 7th Infantry Division was transferred to the 2nd Army, replacing the 15th Infantry Division, which was moved to the vicinity of Chwastów. Meanwhile the 4th Infantry Division was detached from the 3rd Army, withdrawn, and put in reserve status for use at Piłsudski's discretion.

Rydz was ordered to advance on the Dnieper on a front extending from the mouths of the Prypeć and Krasna Rivers, seize Kiev, and secure the bridges over the Dnieper so the Poles could gain access to the eastern bank of the river.

* Józef Rybak (1882-1953) was a veteran of the Austro-Hungarian army and the Legions, serving on various fronts during the First World War. After serving in various combat and staff positions in the Polish army, he retired in 1930. He remained in occupied Poland during the Second World War, but did not partake in any partisan activities, despite being briefly jailed by the Nazis. After the war, he offered his services to the post-war Polish army, but was rejected due to his age.

Meanwhile the Soviets, exploiting this brief delay in the Polish advance, took the opportunity to evacuate the Ukrainian capital and withdraw across the Dnieper.

Rydz entered Kiev on May 7 and immediately occupied the city's eastern suburbs up to Browary. Except for some skirmishes near the bridges, he encountered little resistance. His soldiers and Ukrainian allies under Symon Petlyura hailed him during ostentatious celebrations designed for maximum propaganda on the following day. After Kiev was secured, Rydz's responsibilities increasingly involved matters affiliated with the city's occupation.

In the meantime, the Red Army concentrated on retrenchment after its disengagement from the Polish army. The defeated 12th Army was reorganized, and the 14th Army was restored to its former strength. Fresh from its victories against Anton Denikin's White forces, Semyon Budenny's 1st Cavalry Army was now transferred to the Polish front. The Soviets' primary goal was to smash Rydz's army, which faced eastward. After breaching the Dnieper at the mouth of the Tetrew River north of Kiev, the Soviet 12th Army was to attack Korosteń. Units from the Soviet 14th Army under Iona Yakir were to advance upon Chwastów and Białacerkiew from the south. But the primary Soviet attack upon the Polish 3rd

Army would come from Budenny's cavalry force, which numbered 38,000.

Budenny's attack commenced toward the end of May, partaking in a pincer movement in which his cavalry managed to advance to Rydz's rear, hampering Polish supply lines and causing the 3rd Army's position to become increasingly perilous. On June 8 and 9, Rydz, determined to defend Kiev, rallied his forces in a defensive "hedgehog" formation, making use of the Dnieper and two smaller rivers as a natural hindrance for the Soviet advance.

But Rydz's intentions were at odds with those of Piłsudski. On June 8, Rydz received a courier bringing orders for him to withdraw to the Tetrew River. He initially refused to carry out instructions while awaiting confirmation from Piłsudski. Piłsudski's courier had been delayed due to bad weather, but a radio transmission on June 10 confirmed his instructions for evacuation. Rydz complied immediately.²⁶ The retreat commenced in the north toward Korosteń, and the 3rd Army was forced to fight its way through an area occupied by the enemy. The Poles were finally able to burst through and hook up with other Polish forces near Borodzianka.

Rydz's withdrawal was executed masterfully. His forces were evacuated with minimal losses and maximal orderliness.

In addition, Budenny attacked the 3rd Army's flank in the vicinity of Koziatyn only after being assured of contact with other Soviet forces on the Ukrainian front, which made him appear indecisive.

Sources and memoirs regarding Rydz's retreat from Kiev paint an unclear picture of events. Piłsudski offers the following account in his work *The Year 1920*:

I had given General Rydz-Śmigły a formal order to abandon Kiev, the possession of which was useless to us in the existing circumstances, and to retire with the mass of his forces along the Kiev-Żytomierz road, so as to strike a blow at Budenny's main force in the vicinity of Żytomierz. At the time it was still conceivable for him to receive support from the left wing of the (Polish) 6th Army and from our cavalry near Koziatyn... Due to circumstances which I have never been able to explain, my message never reached General Rydz-Śmigły, and he proceeded to retreat in a northwesterly direction along the Kiev-Korosteń-Sarny railway through southern Polesie, as if he were deliberately seeking to avoid all contact with Budenny's cavalry.²⁷

This development exposes one of the most outstanding operational mysteries of the year 1920, as recalled in the deep analysis of Tadeusz Kutrzeba,* the 3rd Army's chief of staff, in his work *Wyprawa Kijowska*. After considering several possibilities, Kutrzeba came to the conclusion that

* Tadeusz Kutrzeba (1885-1947) was a veteran of the Austro-Hungarian army, having served on several fronts during the First World War. He went on to serve in various staff positions in the Polish army after Poland became independent. He served with distinction in the September 1939 campaign, was captured by the Germans and spent the duration of the Second World War in captivity. Liberated by American troops, he settled in Great Britain.

Piłsudski's orders never left his headquarters, and the orders which the 3rd Army did receive did not precisely reflect Piłsudski's intentions.²⁸

At the time of the evacuation, Rydz had assumed command of the entire southern front. It must be recognized that he obtained a more valuable defensive posture by retreating at a slower pace in contrast to the more catastrophic impression often presented by accounts of the withdrawal which tend to feature a chronicle of individual isolated military setbacks. His decisions undoubtedly were influenced by the information provided by the individual officers under his command.

In *The Year 1920*, Piłsudski cites the amount of territory forfeited to the enemy from July 8 through July 20. In the north the Poles retreated 295 to 395 kilometers, while in the south the withdrawal involved a distance of 80 to 130 kilometers. Even though the situation in the south did not appear as grave as that in the north, Budenny's army operated with marked tenacity throughout the entire region. Although the primary concentration of his cavalry harassed the rear of the Polish forces in the north, also threatening Polish concentrations along the Bug River, Budenny also managed to deploy substantial forces in the south against Rydz. This compelled Piłsudski to order Rydz to abandon territory on July 25.

At this time, the bulk of Budenny's cavalry was in the Beresteczko-Brody area with aspirations to seize the railway stretching from Lvov to Rawa Ruska. The 12th Army attacked Styr with limited success, while the 14th Army, managing to push back the Polish 6th Army from the vicinity of Zbrucz na Seret, advanced from the southeast toward Lvov. Reinforced with additional cavalry, Rydz counterattacked on July 29. Budenny resisted stubbornly, and a portion of the Polish forces were driven back from Styr na Sudylówka. But after being faced with pressure from his northern and southern flanks, Budenny was forced to abandon Radziwiłłow and Brody on August 2. The five-day battle ended in success for the Poles, but it was not followed up since Piłsudski abruptly aborted the advance because of a substantial situational change on the northern front.²⁹ Nevertheless the battle near Brody served to check Budenny's cavalry, thus diminishing the threat to Lvov. In addition operational contact was established between the 2nd and the 6th Armies, which allowed for the relief of the 18th Infantry Division thus facilitating its transfer to the northern front. Rydz's front had thus been stabilized.

On August 6, Piłsudski ordered a concentration of two armies on the lower Wieprz River for a northerly attack upon the rear of the Soviet forces advancing toward Warsaw.

Halting the Soviet advance was entirely dependent upon the success of this attack. This new area of operations was named the central front, and Piłsudski decided to transfer forces from the southern front to increase its manpower, while the central front's command was bestowed upon Rydz. The weakening of the southern front involved great hardship and posed very serious risks.³⁰

Budenny's cavalry, though also weakened, was nonetheless experienced at offensive operations, and the location of the Soviet southwestern front had raised the possibility of Mikhail Tukhachevsky's army advancing against the rear of the Polish central front.

The abandonment of Lvov was politically impossible. The transfer of troops still engaged in combat from the southern front to the central front also involved great hardship.

Rydz was ordered to transfer two elite units from the southern front to the Wieprz River: the 1st and 3rd Legionary Infantry Divisions. Piłsudski later recalled:

General Rydz-Śmigły carried out his mission in a most able manner. His operations and the maneuvers of his two divisions, the 1st and the 3rd, exhibited one of the most glorious pages in the history of the Polish army.³¹

Rydz withdrew the divisions quickly after obtaining and regaining freedom of movement. The units were thrust toward the north along the Wieprz.

Maneuvers across the Wieprz commenced on the morning of August 16. The 1st Legionary Infantry Division and the 4th

Army, both under Rydz's command, were ordered to reach the road linking Warsaw and Brest-Litovsk by the second day of operations with the assistance of cavalry units under Major Feliks Jaworski. By the first day the 1st Division had advanced 56 kilometers to a line encompassing Rudna, Komarówka, and Brzozowy Kąt. Jaworski's cavalry seized Radzyń, and the 3rd Division reached Zberezę.

By August 17, the combined forces of Rydz-Śmigły and Jaworski had occupied Biała and Międzyrzecze, while the 3rd Division rushed toward Brest-Litovsk. The day marked the turning point on the entire front, as the initiative fell upon the Poles. The Soviet 16th Army abandoned its left flank to the north of Kałuszyn and Siedlce, while the 3rd Army retreated from the Narew River and withdrew to Wyszaków. The Soviet 15th Army also found itself in full retreat toward Przasnysz and Maków. Only the Soviet 4th Army in conjunction with a cavalry corps continued to push westward, engaging some of its forces upon the rear of the Polish 5th Army.

On the following day, the 1st Legionary Infantry Division and Jaworski's cavalry crossed the Bug near Drohiczyn, while the 3rd Division occupied Sławotycze. Meanwhile the 21st Infantry Division overran Mokobody and the 14th Infantry Division took Kałuszyn and Stanisławów, shattering the Soviet 16th Army from its rear. Units of the

1st Army advanced to Jadów, while a division of the 5th Army advanced forward on its right flank after repulsing a Soviet attack.

With the main concentration of Soviet forces now on the opposite side of the Bug, Piłsudski sensed that the decisive battle of the war would occur farther east. He thus decided to reorganize his forces, hastening to Warsaw to convey pertinent instructions on August 18. Piłsudski hoped to pursue the Soviets by cutting off their escape along a line encompassing Brest-Litovsk, Białystok, and Osowiec, thus encircling and destroying them. To this end a new army, the 2nd, was created and placed under Rydz's command. It was composed of units culled from the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division, and the 21st Infantry Division, plus the 1st Lithuanian-Byelorussian Division from the 1st Army and the 41st Infantry Regiment from the 5th Army. Meanwhile the 4th Army was assigned the task of driving the Soviets back to the East Prussian frontier along a line stretching from Kałuszyn to Mazowieck.

On the northern front, Piłsudski assigned the 1st Army the task of moving in a northerly and southeasterly direction, advancing upon a line encompassing Warsaw, Ostrów, and Łomża.³² The 5th Army was to engage a Soviet cavalry corps

under the command of Gaj Dimitrievich Gaj,* as well as the Soviet 4th and 15th Armies. By far the most arduous task fell upon the Polish 2nd and 4th Armies, which Piłsudski had assigned the responsibility of encircling and destroying the enemy.

In a series of isolated skirmishes and battles, the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division occupied Brest-Litovsk on August 19, the 4th Brigade seized Wysokie Litewskie, and the 1st Legionary Infantry Division defeated the Soviets near Sytki. Rydz's forces then occupied Zambrów and Wysokie Mazowieckie, crossing the Narew to the south of Białystok. By August 22, the 1st Legionary Infantry Division had occupied Białystok after a five-hour battle, repelling the Soviet 4th and 15th Armies to the East Prussian frontier. Two days later the 1st Division captured Osowiec, and Grajewo on August 25. Rydz had executed his assignment flawlessly, and the Polish advance ended in success.

A new frontline had surfaced, which ran through Kuźnica to the west of Grodno, through Świsłocz, Białowież, Kamieniec, Litewski, Żabinka to the west of the Bug to Opalin extending to Tyszowce. Such a configuration put the Poles into a position advantageous to offensive action.

* Gaj Dimitrievich Gaj (1887-1937); also known as Gayk Bzhishkhan or Gaj-Khan. He was later executed in Stalin's purges.

On August 26, Piłsudski ordered a reorganization of the 2nd and 4th Armies which was to take place during the first ten days of September.³³ An envelopment was planned involving a rapid advance from the north onto the Soviet rear in the vicinity of Lida in a drive toward the Pripet Marshes. Rydz was entrusted with the main responsibility for the entire operation. An operational group was formed from a portion of the 2nd Army, the 1st Legionary Infantry Division, the 1st Lithuanian-Byelorussian Division, and the 2nd and 4th Cavalry Brigades. Its assignment was to attack Sejny (at that time occupied by the Lithuanians), cross the Niemen near Druskienniki and advanced toward Lida, thus encircling the Soviets who were spread out near the riverbank. The remaining forces from the 2nd Army were to tie down the main Soviet concentration along the existing front. The 4th Army was to advance toward Wołkowysk in order to deceive the enemy into expecting a Polish attack along the front.

After examining Piłsudski's plan, Rydz became convinced that the troops under his command would be the deciding factor of the entire war, not just the battle along the Niemen. In order to achieve the element of surprise which he considered essential to victory, he decided to authorize marches only after dark, increase patrols, and keep communications close to the front at an absolute minimum.

His instructions strongly suggested that the advance would first commence against Lithuania. The divisional and cavalry commanders were not informed that the 2nd Army's attack would be toward Lida instead of Kaunas until September 17.

Rydz released orders from his headquarters the following day. Weighing his options of a successful breach of the Niemen, Rydz came up with two scenarios: a crossing backed by an artillery barrage, or swift seizure of bridges one step in front of the enemy. Since the first option risked Soviet destruction of the bridges, he decided to pursue the second. Units were moved enough distance from the river so that they would not have to advance more than 25 kilometers on the first day of battle. By September 21, these forces were to feign passivity so the forces on the flanks could gain time and give the appearance that the previous day's activities were isolated maneuvers. This would hopefully fool the Soviets into transferring the bulk of their forces elsewhere to their disadvantage, thus allowing the Polish forces on the flanks to fulfill their objectives.

On September 20, the frontline group in the center occupied Nowy Dwór, establishing a line encompassing Bielany, Rogacze, Lipszczany, Kopczany, and Bohotery. After repelling the Soviet 17th Brigade and 6th Riflemen's Division, a Polish alpine division advanced to a line encompassing Staworowo,

Zalesie, Długosielce, and Mieleszkowice. Meanwhile the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division managed to advance to a line encompassing Brzostowica Mała, Brzostowica Wielka, and Gorbacze by the next morning despite stiff enemy resistance.

Re-supplied and ready for combat, the 1st Legionary Infantry Division attacked on the afternoon of September 22, occupying Sejny and breaking the resistance of its Lithuanian defenders, while the 1st Lithuanian-Byelorussian Division avoided confrontation with the Lithuanians by advancing out of Augustów along the road to Serski Las-Fracki, reaching the vicinity of Giby by nightfall. At the same time the 1st Division's 4th Cavalry Brigade advanced in two columns: one through Kodzie upon Kopciowo, and the other to Męciszki via Kalety. The 2nd Cavalry Brigade pushed forward from the vicinity of Czarny Bród and Sucharzewczka late that same afternoon and reached the environs of Kopciowo early the following morning.

Up to this time the northern army group destined for Lida had confined itself strictly to evasive maneuvers thus disguising its true objective.

According to the original plan, the central front was to ford the Niemen and occupy Grodno by September 23, but stubborn Soviet resistance resulted in an inconclusive, two-day battle just north of the city, preventing a Polish

volunteer division from crossing the river. The 21st Alpine Division suffered similar setbacks in its attempt to seize bridges leading into Grodno and cross the river in Komotowo. The 3rd Legionary Infantry Division also encountered heavy pressure throughout the day and was unable to advance. Soldiers on its southern flank were thus partially replaced with units from the 2nd Legionary Infantry Division from the 4th Army on Piłsudski's order. During the course of September 24, the Volunteer Division had failed to penetrate the Soviet fortifications outside of Grodno, as each of its attacks was successfully repelled. Only in the north was the Niemen crossed.

But the next day brought a change of fortune in the center, as Soviet forces along the Niemen defending Grodno started to pull out. While engaged in close combat with the enemy, the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division moved into Zaniemeńsko. By that evening a joint operation of the Volunteer Division and the 21st Alpine Division led to the capture of Grodno. On September 23 the army group on the northern flank was advancing toward Druskienniki, its infantry reaching the rail line connecting Grodno and Vilnius by the next day, while its cavalry approached Raduń. At this point the forces in the north were to pause and allow the central front to catch up.

Rydz's responsibility as commander of the 2nd Army was to determine the best place for fording the river in the least amount of time while incurring losses as minimal as possible. This was an immensely difficult task. It appeared that a division under Lieutenant Colonel Adam Koc,* one of whose infantry brigades had captured a destroyed bridge in Hoża, would be the first to cross the Niemen together with the 2nd Cavalry Brigade. But this force lacked the proper materiel and its artillery was considered ill-trained. Enemy resistance was most fierce where the Alpine Division was operating, but it was equipped with bridging and heavy artillery. By the afternoon of September 25, Rydz had decided that he would rely upon the Alpine Division to bridge the Niemen first. His orders nevertheless made it plain, that all of the divisions on the front take every possible precaution to ensure that the Soviets do not slip away under the cover of night.

After receipt of orders from Piłsudski to resume flanking operations on September 27, Rydz ordered an attack

* Adam Koc (1891-1969) was a POW veteran who had been severely wounded during the First World War. He served in various posts in the Polish army, and was later elected to the Sejm and served as president of the Bank of Poland. In 1937, he was by appointed by Rydz-Śmigły to head the Camp of National Unity (*Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*). He survived an assassination attempt later that year. During the Second World War, he served as a minister in the Polish government-in-exile in London. He emigrated to the United States in 1940.

upon the retreating Soviet 3rd Army near Grodno, while the forces in the center finally crossed the Niemen. However, the bulk of the fighting now took place on the flanks, where the 1st Lithuanian-Byelorussian Division was the first force to engage in battle. The Soviet 3rd Army sustained heavy casualties reaching as high as 50% in some units as it retreated from Grodno. Owing to its numerical superiority, the Soviet 3rd Army had sealed its own fate, abandoning twelve cannons, fifteen machine guns, and other war materiel to the Poles. About 1000 Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner. On September 27 units of the 4th Cavalry Brigade and the 1st Legionary Infantry Division attacked the Soviet 3rd Army's northern flank near Raduń, cutting off its escape route west of Lida and throwing back the 21st Riflemen's Division.

Events had happened so rapidly, that Rydz had lost direct knowledge of the situation on the flanks. By nightfall he managed to contact the Alpine Division and ordered it to pursue the enemy as rapidly as possible toward Lida in conjunction with the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division. Rydz wanted to assemble four infantry divisions and two cavalry brigades in Lida by September 30. Meanwhile the 2nd Legionary Infantry Division would secure bridges and the rail junction while the bulk of this force would be put into reserve status.

Rydz anticipated the battle for Lida to commence on September 28, but only provided this information to his infantry and cavalry officers at the front, as success was dependent on their initiative. Complying with Rydz's earlier orders, the 1st Legionary Infantry Division, attacking from the northeast, entered Lida on September 28. It then turned westward, thus severing the Soviets' escape route from Lebioda to Mołodeczno. Fragments of the Soviet 3rd Army still attempted to fight their way through Lida, but the 1st Division managed to beat back three of these Soviet attacks within the course of the day.

On Piłsudski's instruction, Rydz ordered a pursuit of the Soviets on the afternoon of September 29 even though his soldiers were exhausted. The political and military cost of waiting was far too risky to stay put, since the potential of securing an eastern frontier favorable to Poland depended on swift military action.³⁴

We must be conscious that the fate of the entire war rests upon the speed of this operation, which will have a profound influence on the progress of peace negotiations in Riga.³⁵

Dąb-Biernacki's men in the 1st Legionary Infantry Division, the 2nd and 4th Cavalry Brigades, and 13th Uhlán Regiment were to join the advance toward Lida and Nowogródek assisted by the Alpine Division. Rydz depended on this force to destroy

the Soviet forces falling back upon a line encompassing Lida, Nowogródek, and Mir by severing the rail line connecting Baranowicze, Stołpce, and Mińsk. In addition, the 2nd Army was to seize Mołodeczno and dispatch one division northerly toward Świąciany. The entire operation was coordinated with General Lucjan Żeligowski's plan to capture Vilnius. The 2nd Army was to cover Żeligowski from the east.* On October 5, Rydz declared that the 2nd Army was to move into trenches abandoned by the Germans and the reorganization of reserves in preparation for a potential advance upon Mołodeczno. Yet this plan had to be modified when Piłsudski immediately ordered an advance upon Świąciany. Forced to comply, Rydz ordered the 3rd Legionary Infantry Division to attack between the Red Army and the Lithuanians. Świąciany fell on October 10, and Soviet access to Vilnius was aborted. That same day, the 2nd Army launched an offensive upon Mołodeczno, a vital communications hub. After two days of heavy fighting, the

* Piłsudski was determined to incorporate Vilnius, his native city, into Poland, even though this had the potential of complicating relations with the Entente. Żeligowski, also a native of Vilnius, seemed perfect for the task and his command of the military forces which were to seize the city had been carefully engineered by Piłsudski. For details, see Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972) pp. 236-7. Lucjan Żeligowski (1865-1947) served in the Russian army, fighting in both the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War. He served as a Sejm deputy from 1935 to 1939, and managed to evade capture and go abroad during the September 1939 campaign. From London, he issued a public appeal shortly after the Second World War for Poles to return to their homeland.

city was finally secured, compelling the Soviets to agree to a preliminary peace agreement. A cease fire was to take place at midnight on October 18.

Rydz's forces had already been reorganized four days previously. One portion was relegated to peacetime status, while the other remained on alert in case of a breakdown in negotiations. Rydz accordingly issued a statement thanking the 2nd Army for its distinguished contribution to victory, singling out its field commanders for special merit. An era in Rydz's life as a military commander had ended, but not forever.

NOTES FOR PART II

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- ¹ A. Ajnenkiel, "Z Dziejów Tymczasowego Rządu Ludowego w Lublinie," *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 4(1958), p. 1064.
- ² B. Miedziński, *Wspomniena*, pp. 131-132.
- ³ H. Jabłonski, *Polityka polskiej partii socjalistycznej w czasie wojny 1914-1918*, (Warsaw, 1958), p. 484.
- ⁴ Miedziński, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
- ⁵ F. Honorowski, *Parlament i rząd w Polsce niepodległej. Rok 1918*, (Warsaw, 1938), pp. 535-543. Dubiel's recollection of this event was from 24 December 1936.
- ⁶ T. Nałęcz, *Polska Organizacja Wojskowa 1914-1918*, (Ossolineum, 1984), p. 214.
- ⁷ Centralne Archiwum Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (hereafter CA KC PZPR), Instytucje Tymczasowego Rządu Ludowego w Lublinie 1918-1919, sygn. 129/1, k. 1, copy of communication dated 7 November 1918.
- ⁸ CA KC PZPR, Instytucje Tymczasowego Rządu Ludowego w Lublinie 1918-1919, sygn. 129/1, k. 18, leaflet.
- ⁹ R. Roja, *Legends and Facts*, (Warsaw, 1932), p. 106.
- ¹⁰ Miedziński, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ¹² J. Piłsudski, "Poprawki historyczne: Uwagi do pamiętników Daszyńskiego," *Pisma zbiorowe*, IX, p. 312.
- ¹³ Miedziński, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
- ¹⁴ CA KC PZPR, Instytucje Tymczasowego Rządu Ludowego w Lublinie 1918-1919, sygn. 129/3, k. 17, original typewritten document.
- ¹⁵ "Nasy nowy Wódz," *Polska Zbrojna*, 139(21 May 1935).
- ¹⁶ A. Przybylski, *Wojna polska 1918-1921*, (Warsaw, 1930), pp. 54-55.
- ¹⁷ CAW, Naczelne Dowództwo Wojska Polskiego, Oddz. 5, Rozkaz Sztabu Generalnego nr. 79, t. 32, pp. 122-129, 196. Rydz was to relay command of the operational group to General Babiński on 3 April 1919.
- ¹⁸ A. Przybylski, *Ofensywa na Wilno w kwietniu 1919 roku*, (Warsaw: Bellona, 1929), p. 98.
- ¹⁹ E. Rydz-Śmigły, "Wielkanoc 1919 roku," *Naród i Wojsko*, 8(10 April 1936).

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- ²⁰ A. Przybylski, *Bój obronny o Wilno*, (Warsaw, 1929), p. 6.
- ²¹ The Suwałki Regiment, composed of two battalions (five companies) arrived in Vilnius on April 27.
- ²² Cited in A. Przybylski, *Bój obronny o Wilno*, pp. 23-24.
- ²³ W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski 1864-1945*, 1st ed., II, pt. 1, p. 277.
- ²⁴ E. Rydz-Śmigły, *Byście o sile nie zapomnieli: Rozkazy, artykuły, mowy, 1904-1936*, (Lvov, 1936), p. 96.
- ²⁵ W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *op.cit.*, II, pt. 1, p. 228.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ²⁷ J. Piłsudski, *Year 1920 and its Climax: Battle of Warsaw during the Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920*, (New York: Piłsudski Institute of America, 1972), p. 82.
- ²⁸ T. Kutzeba, *Wyprawa Kijowska*, (Warsaw, 1937), pp. 283-286.
- ²⁹ The Red Army had seized Brest-Litovsk on August 1, and the Polish forces defending the city had retreated to the west bank of the Bug River. The Red Army then advanced to the vicinity of Łomża. Although Piłsudski came up with a plan to counterattack near Brest-Litovsk, it was never implemented.
- ³⁰ Piłsudski was unable to transfer any forces from the northern front, as they were necessary for the defense of Warsaw.
- ³¹ Piłsudski, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
- ³² The 1st Army had been reduced to two infantry divisions, the 8th and the 10th.
- ³³ T. Kutrzeba, *Bitwa nad Niemnem*, (Warsaw, 1926), p. 31.
- ³⁴ In the north Piłsudski sought to secure the rail line connecting Łuniniec, Baraowicze, Lida, and Vilnius, obtain a crossing on the upper Niemen approaching Mińsk so it could serve as a rallying point for the Red Army, and secure a corridor to Latvia.
- ³⁵ E. Rydz-Śmigły, *Byście o sile nie zapomnieli*, p. 115.