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Battle of Warsaw

The shape of the Polish eastern border and relations with Bolshevik Russia (and later the USSR) up until 1939 were determined by the Polish-Russian war of 1919–21. Even before an open conflict with the Bolsheviks broke out, Poland had been involved in war action in Galicia with the troops of the West Ukrainian People's Republic. The Polish troops controlled Volhynia and there were also skirmishes with Ukrainian Bolsheviks. Likewise, in Belarus and Lithuania, where many Poles lived, the Bolsheviks tried to implement their revolutionary ideas of setting up popular republics using force and terror.

Józef Piłsudski's political agenda included the idea that the creation of a federation of anti-Bolshevik nation states would push the Polish border further away from the Bolsheviks, with Poland-allied Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania between them. That idea did not come to fruition, however, because of both lack of time and political will of various stakeholders. The only successful alliance was the military one with the Ukrainian chieftain Symon Petliura.



The Bolsheviks sought to spread the revolutionary movement across entire Western Europe. Given their plans, the allied troops of Poland and Ukraine started operations, with Ukraine taking control of Kiev in April 1920. A war began, and at stake was not just Poland's independence but also stopping the revolutionary wave and Bolshevik terror.

At the same time, western countries, pursuing their own interests and policies, not only failed to support Poland, but also exerted strong pressure so that the wartime operations could be stopped and unfavourable peace terms accepted. In the circumstances, Polish society mobilised on a massive scale, with volunteers joining the army in high numbers, including many very young people. Their enthusiasm and willingness to fight partly compensated for their lack of wartime experience. Civilians, in turn, supported the war financially offering their contributions. The war was won as Polish cryptologists broke encryption codes of the Red Army, thanks to which Russian cables could be intercepted and decoded on a regular basis.

Finally, a decisive battle took place on 15 August 1920, known as the Battle of Warsaw. Under Józef Piłsudski's command, the Polish troops surprised the Russian army, dispersed it and forced it to withdraw. In September 1920, the Poles defeated the Bolshevik troops yet again in a six-day battle on the Niemen River. On 12 October, a truce was signed in Riga and peace talks began.

The Polish victory helped stop the revolution in Europe, gave Poland independence it had pursued so fervently and determined the Polish eastern border. The war had also a symbolic meaning. After 123 years of partitions, humiliation, forced Russification on Russian-controlled territories and repressions against the Poles, the victory brought joy and a sense of strength as well as enthusiasm of building the regained statehood on one's own.



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References:

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