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Poles active in combat during the First World War

The first Polish military appearance during the First World War was an initiative by Józef Piłsudski aimed at instigating an uprising against the Russians. On 6 August, he led the First Cadre Company made up of members of rifle squads and marched from Cracow in the direction of Kielce. However, in the face of missing support from both the Austrians and the Poles from the Kingdom of Poland the Cadre Company was forced to return to Cracow. The event marked the very beginning of the Polish Legions.

As a Polish unit under Austrian command, the Legions were comprised of three brigades: the First Brigade under Józef Piłsudski, the Second (Carpathian) Brigade under Józef Haller and the Third Brigade led by Stanisław Szeptycki. In 1915, for a brief moment the Puławy Legion was active at the side of the Russian army, yet it was disbanded after several months due to opposition from the tsarist authorities. Attempts at creating a Polish army in France fell through as well since the French were afraid to meddle in the Russian policy concerning the Polish cause. Once his efforts to instigate an uprising proved unsuccessful, Józef Piłsudski began to assemble a secret Polish Military Organisation (POW) in Warsaw, which was to prepare personnel and a future Polish army for a fight against the Russians. In 1915-16, the POW focused primarily on training officers.



In July 1917, the Polish units under Austrian command experienced the 'Oath Crisis' as the soldiers from the First and Third Brigades of the Legions, inspired by Józef Piłsudski – disappointed with lack of action with a view to establishing a Polish state, refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the emperors of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The rebellious soldiers were detained in camps in Szczypiorno and Beniaminów while Piłsudski was sent to a German prison in Magdeburg.

It was only after the revolution of February (March) 1917 in Russia that an opportunity came to form Polish military units and three corps were set up: the First Polish Corps under General Józef Dowbor Muśnicki, the Second Polish Corps under Sylwester Stankiewicz (in February 1918, merged at Soroca with the Second Brigade of the Legions, which was liquidated and command taken by Józef Haller; on 10-11 May 1918, the Second Corps fought against the army of the Central Powers in the battle of Kaniów, where it was defeated), and the Third Polish Corps under Eugeniusz de Henning-Michaelis, fighting in Ukraine.

After the Kaniów defeat and dispersion of the units of the Second Corps, the situation of Polish soldiers

was very difficult. Both the Bolsheviks and Ukrainians failed to respect the wartime agreements and executed soldiers and officers they caught without trial. That is why those still alive marched through Russia all the way to Murmansk, then controlled by the troops of the Triple Entente. It was there that the Poles set up Polish units under British command which fought against the Bolsheviks. Another Polish unit was created in Arkhangelsk. The 'Murmanskians' were active in northern Russia until September 1919 and then were evacuated to Poland by sea. Once in the home country, they fought in the Polish-Soviet War.

After the defeat of the first Polish units in France (the Bayonne Legion at Arras) in 1914, no Polish units were established before 1917. Only after the February revolution in Russia did the French president Raymond Poincaré decide to issue a decree setting up a Polish army in France. Under the decree, recruitment started among the Poles, mainly prisoners-of-war, in June 1917. In October 1918, the army came under the command of General Józef Haller who had returned from Russia. The army had around 70,000 soldiers. The 'Blue Army' (the name deriving from the colour of their uniforms) did not fight during the war yet after returning to Poland supported the Polish army units fighting in the Polish-Soviet War.



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References:

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