

## PART I

### Rupture of the North-eastern front and Tukhachevski's march on Warsaw

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#### CHAPTER I

##### The Decisive Attack of the Russian Forces on the Auta

###### Preparations for the Decisive Attack

Having gathered his troops on the Auta River, Tukhachevski, as the commander of the Russian Western Front, addressed them on 2 July 1920 with a fiery revolutionary order. Among other things, he declared that “the soldiers of the red banner stand ready for mortal combat with the soldiers of the white eagle”. It called for “revenge for the desecration of Kiev and for drowning the government of the criminal Piłsudski in the blood of the crushed Polish army”.

“In the West the fate of the universal revolution is at stake! The way to universal conflagration lies over the corpse of Poland!”, cried the commander of the Reds, concluding his historic order with a significant rally: “On to Vilnius – Mińsk – Warsaw – let us march!”

To make the Russian peasants understand the call by their leader, they had been prepared for this victorious march to the “rotten West” for a long time. For months, countless pamphlets and leaflets had flooded the ranks of the Russian troops.

It was strenuously explained to the Russian peasant and good-hearted *Krasnoarmiets*, that history had chosen him for the liberation of the oppressed international proletariat, setting off a world revolution.

Since the authors the Red Army’s supposed victory were not sure of the effectiveness of their own arguments, in case of their failure they had other, more “national” slogans at their disposal.

In this second category of arguments, the Russian Soviets’ war against Poland was a strictly national war. All righteous Russians should feel the need for revenge on the partitioning Poles, for their attack on the rights of the “one and indivisible great Russia”, by supporting an independent Ukrainian state and for dishonouring the sacred gates of Kiev in 1920.

Besides all this, at least according to the political commissars of the front, the heroism of the Red soldier was not going to be exposed to too severe a test.

The international proletariat had aligned itself with revolutionary Russia. It made it impossible for Poland to supply itself with the necessary means of war from France, its natural source.

The route by sea was already cut off. The workers of Gdansk, in solidarity with Bolshevism, watched to ensure not a single wagon of ammunition was unloaded in their port. Should the Poles wish to transport munitions by land, the Soviets were able to terrorise neutral countries and force them to declare a blockade. Moreover, they had sufficient assurances from the Austrian and Czech workers that they would not allow any war transport heading for Poland to pass through their territory.

Thus, Poland was cut off from the world. Having neither sizeable reserve stocks nor its own war industry, it would quickly succumb to impotence.

Once inside the country, they were told to not expect any serious resistance from the Polish workers or peasants. For, according to Tukhachevski, the internal revolution in Poland was sufficiently prepared. The Polish peasant, said the reports of Bolshevik agents, was eagerly awaiting the Red Army, expecting to receive land from it. The Polish worker, likewise, was panting with class hatred and longed for revenge. The “Communist Government of the Polish Soviet Republic” would therefore be greeted enthusiastically in Warsaw; while the battles of the “iron infantry and bold cavalry” of the Red Army would not be heavy, but would sweep away the “shitty Whites” like an avalanche. Only the first effort might be difficult. For that, however, the commander of the Western Front had ready twice the numbers and material, and an even greater ratio in the decisive sector.

Two surprises were to overthrow Tukhachevski’s thinking. The first, which seemed advantageous to him at the time, was that the Red Army broke the Polish front too quickly on the Auta River. The second, unpleasant for Russia and fraught with historical consequences, was the surprise prepared for him on the Vistula in the heart of Poland, which – as it turned out later – was to foil all the revolutionary calculations of the Soviets.



## The Attack of 4 July 1920

Tukhachevski, when starting his march on Warsaw, had full freedom of strategic movement, depending only on the lie of the land and his communications.

The even dispersion of the Polish divisions across the entire opposing front, with a lack of strong reserves in depth on their side in the line of attack, ensured the initial success of the Western Front commander's plan.

In his study (*The March on the Vistula*), Tukhachevski said he chose the direction of the attack to use Lithuania and East Prussia to support the right wing of the Russian front, and to push the Polish forces towards the Polesie marshes.

The offensive was undertaken by four Russian armies – 3rd, 4th, 15th and 16th – plus Gai-Khan's 3rd Cavalry Corps.<sup>6</sup>

The foolish plan of extinguishing the Polish army in the Polesie marshes was quickly abandoned, and the planned deep bypass of General Szeptycki's left wing was cut short. The initial plan took on a more modest overall execution, in order to ensure its success at the first strike.

The Red Army leader, as a child of the revolution, knew his soldiers well. He knew that their sick souls needed a boost. Those soldiers did not tolerate failure, easily succumbing to panic under pressure. "The iron infantry and the bold cavalry of the Red flag", needed the drug of initial success in order to maintain an advance over a long time. The Red Army was not able to win consistently and gradually, so it was necessary to play on the sensitive strings of the Red Army's soul. This time, it must be said, they were played well.

Our left wing of the Polish north-eastern front collapsed under the hurricane-like shock of the carefully assembled superior numbers. We could not offer a sufficiently strong resistance on that front against the well-formulated objectives and the well-calculated efforts used by the Russians in their attack, even though several days before the battle began, we were made aware of the enemy's forces and intentions on the other side of the Auta.

The huge length of the Polish front was difficult to maintain with the forces that the Commander-in-Chief had at his disposal in the summer of 1920. It was made all the more impossible because of the continuing battles with Budenny's Horse Army in the south prevented the organisation of reserves and their transfer to the northern operational theatre in time.

It is easy to criticise a deed done, but doing it is yourself at the time is infinitely more difficult. Today we can think of better ways of playing out the decisive duel with Tukhachevski. Among other solutions, we could have used the same retreat manoeuvres we did in July 1920 in the south-east, even without divisions in reserve, combined with a flank counter-attack against the main attacking group of the Russian armies. That would have given some chance of success, but not without risks, all the same.

It is also easy, now, to point to the consequences of our strategic overreach at that time. However, when we consider the issues objectively, we must at the same time remember the lack of resources of the 1920 Polish Army that I discuss in the third part of this study, because they also contributed to Tukhachevski's victory in the battle he started with such a Napoleonic gesture on 4 July 1920.

### Direct Consequences of the Bolshevik Strike

The equilibrium shattered at the Auta, could not be restored until we reached the Vistula, which was at the beginning of August, having made a retreat unprecedented in the history of war – about 600 km in the north and over 400 km in the south.

It is not easy to regather the troops caught in such a gigantic and fast-flowing retreating movement and to throw them into a counter-attack.

Ignoring the mental decomposition of soldiers during the retreat – with confidence lost in their commanders and in their own power, and greatly overestimating the enemy's forces – to do such a thing one must have the courage to gather your forces and strike.

In order to regroup and form the necessary reserves, space and time are needed. If these necessary conditions for success are not created, orders aimed any counter-manoeuve during a retreat, will remain a dead idea and a paper order. (Obtaining these conditions were the objectives of the Commander-in-Chief's orders of 5, 9 and 11 July.) Stopping a retreat on a line lying deep in the interior in order to commit the mistake of passive defence, is even less advisable.

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<sup>6</sup> Gai-Khan was the nom de guerre of Hayk Bzhishkyan. The first name is generally transliterated via Russian in English to the form I have used here, but other alternatives, such as Gay-Khan, Gaj-Khan and Guy-Khan appear. His unit was the 3rd Cavalry Corps, often transliterated directly from the Russian to KavKor, although I have used CavCorps.



For these very reasons, the instructions of the Commander-in-Chief of 9 July 1920 were unrealistic and unfeasible, as Marshal Piłsudski noted in his book "The Year 1920". They aimed to stop the enemy on the line at Wilno, where the old German positions were, and on the Styr and Zbrucz [Zbruch], then to lead an active defence of that line.

Well, on 9 July we were too close to the line of German trenches to hope to go about regrouping our forces on them.

Active defence of a given line is an effective method, but only when defending a front in a period of relative calm. The second condition for its effectiveness is having reserves, without which any such initiative is out of the question. Having no reserves at our disposal and being in full retreat, we were not able to provide the force needed to stop Tukhachevski's advance, even in the event of a temporary cessation of the retreat on the line of German trenches. To the south we were prevented from doing so by the Horse Army getting into our rear.

The excessively vague instructions stated in the goals of the planned "vigorous counter-attack on the entire front", did not provide the necessary means for their implementation. The simple, but at the time impossible, order to transfer one division from the Polesie group to the Supreme Command's reserve did not solve the problem.

The Neman-Szczara-Styr line was also untenable in the same way. Despite a theoretical order (21 July), that we were forced to ignore – unable to organise resistance there, and even less able to regain the initiative, as our fruitless attempts at holding this line proved.

Thus, in the second half of July 1920, we found ourselves on the last natural barrier to the interior of the country, starting on the line of the Neman and then on the line of the Bug.

### **Polish Projects for a Counter-manoeuvre**

Warsaw had high hopes for the Bug River and the Brześć fortress located on it, considering both the fort and the river to be considerable strategic obstacles.

In the Commander-in-Chief's operational orders of 27 July and also the 3 July letter of General Henryks to General Rozwadowski, it was sought to exploit these obstacles to stabilise on the line of the Bug – Ossowiec [Osowiec-Twierdza] – Grajewo, and eventually along the line of the Bug – Ostrołęka – the Omulew line. There was to be a counter-attack by reserves grouped primarily in the Brześć area but also in the Ostrow area.

At the same time, that is to say about 1 August, the 2nd Army, supported by a hastily organised cavalry group consisting of two divisions near Zamość, was to defeat Budenny. Then, as the Commander's reserve, it was to lead the decisive attack from there.

The idea of a relief attack northwards with forces freed from the south, working from between Kowel [Kovel'] and Brześć, cannot be found in the Commander's works. Probably not formulated before 30 July, that is before the Commander-in-Chief's departure for Chełm, it ceased to be relevant on his 3 August return to Warsaw.

Only a letter from then Chief of the Operations Branch of the GHQ, Colonel S. G. Juljan Stachiewicz, sent by radio on 29 July by order of the Commander-in-Chief, contained the following vaguely sketched guidelines for a possible counter-offensive, after a pessimistic overview of the situation.

A counter-attack is thus proposed from the Brześć area with the bulk of the forces towards the north-east. The following conditions are necessary for this: Brześć with the bridgehead must be held, as well as the crossings over the Bug, which will secure Brześć and the railway to the rear ... One has to take into account that after bypassing Kobryn the whole Bolshevik 16th Army will attack you, General, as it has orders to march on Brześć. Your mission is to withstand the pressure of that army and at the same time quickly prepare the mentioned counter-attack.

Finding myself in Brześć, I seriously considered how best to respond to the intentions of the Commander-in-Chief. The Polesie group was already too weak even for the first part of the assigned mission. This was all the more so because, with the Bolsheviks both in front of and behind us, it was impossible to think of breaking away from them or attempting to organise the reserves necessary for counter-attacking them.

Therefore, I expected further concrete executive orders from GHQ, which would explain precisely the execution of the desired manoeuvre. I received no such orders, due to the abandonment of the concept.

The precondition for the execution of the plan was to hold not only Brześć, but rather the Bug River line between Brześć and Małkinia for long enough to organise an effective resistance on the Małkinia – Ostrów line. That is to stop the troops from the North-Eastern front from retiring, if only for ten days. This was indeed the Commander's aim, as he constantly reinforced the Narew group, led initially by General Wroczyński, and later by General Koja.

However, the unsuccessful attempts by the armies of the North-eastern Front to recapture the enemy's line along the Szczara and Neman rivers, the throwing back of our 4th Army by the Soviet 16th Army on 22 July at Bereza Kartuska



[Biaroza] and Pruzhany, and the defeat of the 1st Army on 23 July, thwarted all the plans at their very foundation. Those events forced us to withdraw the Polesie group from its far eastern sector, despite the fact that the armies of the South-eastern front were still holding on to the Styr River, while our 18th Infantry Division was fighting stubbornly with the Horse Army near Brody.

The departure of my Polesie group from the Drohiczyn – Kamień-Koszyrski [Kamin'-Kashyrs'kyi] line resulted in the capture of Kamieniec Litewski [Kamyanyets] and Czeremcha by the Russian army.

As I withdrew with the group's operational staff to Kobryn on 26 July, I noticed I had absolutely no-one on my left wing, due to the 14th Wielkopolska Division retiring to Kobryn; at the same time I noticed that the Red Army was trying to cut our lines of retreat, as a mixed-arm group of Bolshevik forces had already taken Żabinka railway station, located between Kobryn and Brześć.

Not for the first time since the retreat from the Dnieper River, the Polesie group, linking the northern and southern fronts, together with the 14th Infantry Division, prevented the wave of disintegration going down the front, which was constantly coming at us from the north after the defeat suffered on 4 July.

The northern front, despite only the 1st Army having to deal with a large numerical superiority of the enemy, retreated at an average speed of 30 km per day, and that without fighting. Had that retreating wave in turn taken the 14th ID and Polesie Group, the southern front would have been threatened from the north and would have needed to give ground too, despite having so far offered a generally organised resistance to the enemy, so retreating much more slowly, and in good order.

At this time the units of the Bolshevik 16th Army started to converge southwards, although cautiously, in order to attack Żabinka and, on 27 July threaten Kobryn from the north. An order from the Commander of 27 July to withdraw the 14th Infantry Division and the 11th Infantry Brigade to the front reserve in the Brześć area, was therefore no longer feasible. Nor did anyone try to enforce that order. It was obvious that the Polesie group and the 14th ID were entering a period of the sustained fighting, as they had to take on almost the entire Soviet 16th Army, which was not facing any serious resistance from the remaining components of our 4th Army.

#### **The importance of the fall of Brześć.**

Having driven the Red troops out of Żabinka and having provisionally secured Kobryn, we started to finish the organisation of the defence of Brześć as quickly as we could. Its bridgehead was oriented towards the rear because it had been built to face west, and was the pivot point of the whole Polish front.

The reorganisation of the fortress was directed by Colonel Słupski, who had at his disposal the 32nd Infantry Regiment, three staging battalions and the 16th Regiment of Heavy Artillery. Unfortunately, the garrison was not worth much, as the 32nd Regiment, exhausted during the hard battles of the retreat, was told to gain its breath back in the fortress, not to defend it. The staging battalions were always weak in battle, and in this case more so as they were armed with a disparate set of weapons and lacked sufficient ammunition: they posed little serious combat value.

At the same time that my command post arrived in Brześć, a fortification group consisting of several engineers was sent to it by the High Command. The fact that it was sent so late is one more proof that the idea of a counter-attack at Brześć was taken too late.

When we learned that the Soviet 10th Division was approaching the northern forts of Brześć, we rushed to them during the night of 27-28 July, together with the 16th Infantry Division, to prevent the Russians gaining access to the fort.

However, that division had already retreated all the way from the Rzeczyca [Rechitsa] and Dnieper Rivers to Brześć on the Bug. Twice it had to break through on the way. It was exhausted both physically and morally and had less than 2,000 bayonets.

Moreover, its commander allowed himself to be outdone by the Soviet 2nd Division which took the northern fort of Tiuchenicze [Tiukhinichi], contenting himself with mistakenly garrisoning the village of that name. That facilitated the Red Army's assault on the city, undertaken on 1 August.

To these disadvantages one must add the very poorly designed and half-demolished fortifications of the eastern half of the bridgehead, built by the Germans, and not repaired by us when we had the time.

The bridgehead's excessive extent, combined with the need to defend the northern section of the Bug River, up to Pratulin, and to protect the railway line to Kowel, from where transportation of war material was still flowing, as well as the need to guard the over 100 km distance separating the Polesie group from the 3rd Army fighting in Volhynia, was a task that exceeded the strength of the Polesie group. It did not have 8,000 bayonets (the 16th Division – 3,000



bayonets, the 17th Infantry Brigade – 2,000, the Mountain Division – about 2,400, the 32nd Infantry Regiment - 700, the staging battalions – 700).

The Polesie group, coordinating its movement with that of the 14th Infantry Division, which was breaking through from Kobryn to Kamieniec Litewski, withdrew on 28 July to Brześć.

Retreating from the Dnieper, we left nothing of any value in the Polesie area. The evacuation of the operational area of the group was carried out carefully. There were moments when the retreat was halted to save valuable material. This was the case with the Polesie battle flotilla, for which we stopped the retreat near Petryków and Pinsk; it was the same with 100 wagons of coal reserves at the Łuniniec [Luninets] junction station. Everything of any value was transported back home. In Brześć, on the other hand, we found more than 3,000 wagons haphazardly crowded together at the station, which had come there with supplies from the northern and southern fronts. The station was jammed. The ammunition and food had not yet been moved back by the front's quarter-master. It took the superhuman energy of the officers and clerks who directed the evacuation of Brześć, and the proven experience of the Polish railwaymen, to push all that material by force beyond the Vistula River. The frantic widening of the track to Dęblin also allowed us, sometimes under full enemy fire, to save the large amount of broad-gauge rolling stock.<sup>7</sup>

The attacks launched on the fortress on 29 July were repulsed that day over the entire line. On the following day the units of the Soviet 57th, 10th and 2nd Divisions repeated their attacks, but again without success. At the same time, however, the Red 8th Division crossed the Bug River north of Brześć, in the Janów [Ivanava] area, while other units captured the western bank of the Bug near Niemirów and Mielnik.

On top of this was the fall of the fortress of Ossowiec, the defeat of the 4th Army on 29 July, and the simultaneous failure of the 1st Army to hold the Russian forces beyond the line Brześć – Bug – Ostrołęka, which was the place established by the order of the Commander on 27 July as the starting line for the intended counter-offensive.

The concept of counter-attack from the area of Brześć – Kowel, as conceived by the Commander, thus foundered definitively.

The orders for the 4th Army and the rest of the troops of the North-Eastern Front to counter-attack remained thus without effect. The front command, on the other hand, having no reserves other than dispersed formations, was not able to take the initiative on its own behalf. General Suszyński's cavalry group formed in Ostrołęka, consisting of three regiments and later incorporated into General Wroczyński's operational group, was only able to provide temporary and inadequate protection for the left flank of the front against encirclement from the north, where the Russian 3rd Cavalry Corps was operating skilfully. It was for this reason that General Józef Haller, upon taking command of the north-eastern front on 31 July, ceased the uncoordinated attempts at counter-attacks, and began preparations for a battle on the Bug River, in order to initiate a decisive battle. General Weygand, who arrived in Poland on 25 July, had advised such an undertaking on the Bug – Ostrołęka – Omulew line.

The realisation of those plans was prevented by the then critical situation on the Ukrainian front, as hopes for a quick and victorious end to the battle with Budenny had failed. The 2nd Army, therefore, together with the Southern Cavalry Group and the 18th Infantry Division, was involved from 28 July in heavy fighting in the area of Berestecz [Berestechko] and Brody, and could not easily be freed in order to carry out the action envisaged by the order of the Commander of 9 July.

On the afternoon of 1 August Soviet troops, having been reinforced, launched a concentrated attack on the Brześć fortress. The attack was particularly fierce from the north, with the Soviet 2nd Division striking at a sector of the 16th Infantry Division, where the 63rd Infantry Regiment fought bravely. Similarly, their 10th Rifle Division, advancing along the Żabinka – Brześć railway line, attacked with vigour, but held back by our 32nd Infantry Regiment. At the same time the units of the Soviet Mozyr group attacked the Mountain Division.

The beginning of the attack caught me, together with the Chief of Staff of the Polesie group, Capt. General Wolikowski, in Biała. I had been summoned there by General Józef Haller, who was touring the front to collect direct observations. Not waiting for his arrival, I returned immediately to Brześć as soon as I received the message.

At first, the Reds' assault was repulsed across the entire line, with them attacking in several rows in the traditional Russian manner. However, the fort at Rzczyca, garrisoned mostly by a staging battalion, fell at about 17:00, which caused serious confusion on our side. General Galica, who replaced me, together with the chief of operations Major Rostworowski, vigorously opposed any idea of abandoning the fortress. After my return, the artillery, which had left Brześć, was moved back to the right bank of the Bug River. We restored the broken discipline in the units by means of

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<sup>7</sup> The Russians used a larger gauge than the Germans. During WWI the Germans had extended their gauge further and further east, so that it then obviously reached Brześć.





harsh measures and took back the Rzeczyca fort from the rear with a bayonet attack, led by the available Mountain battalions.

A fierce battle raged in this way until late in the night across the entire eastern section of the line of forts. The exhausted 32nd Infantry Regiment finally gave way, and the Bolsheviks broke into the city at night through their section of the line. At around midnight, together with the local Communist organisations, they attacked the citadel, where the Polesie Group's staff were working, and took its telephone exchange along with its personnel, during which the group's excellent quartermaster, Major Merak, was mortally wounded.

In these conditions I ordered the evacuation of the bridgehead, keeping the citadel in my hands together with the line of the Bug River throughout my sector. These orders were carried out on 2 August at dawn, with individual units of the Mountain Division having to force their way through with bayonets. However, all of the troops left the city in good order and occupied their new positions without any obstruction from the Soviet troops, who had been weakened by the losses they had suffered. On 2 August the Soviet 57th Rifle Division and the 2nd and 10th Divisions of the Soviet 16th Army entered the city of Brześć. The 58th Rifle Division, which together with the 57th belonged to their Mozyr Group, were moved further south to cut the line of communications between Brześć and Kowel at the junction of the Polesie Group with our 3rd Army.

Despite the fall of Brześć and, more importantly, despite the fact that our 4th Army (except for the brave 14th Infantry Division) was already retreating in indescribable disorder and with the enemy on its heels, and despite the 1st Army being beaten on 31 July across the Bug River (thrown westwards out of Brańsk and Tykocin) – General Rozwadowski<sup>8</sup>, who took over the role of Chief of General Staff on 22 July 1920, still adhered to his intention to counter-manoeuve from the Siedlce region.

He wanted to counter-attack at Brześć and at the same time prepare an action on the left wing of the northern front. He also demanded that the commander of the Polesie group should put at his disposal for this purpose the 16th Infantry Brigade and the 4th Regiment of Podhale Rifles,<sup>9</sup> which would secure the connection of the group with the 3rd Army.

But, contrary to his predictions, the action conducted in the south against Budenny was unsuccessful, and the 17th Infantry Brigade was indispensable to the sector it occupied. Furthermore, the enemy crossed the Bug River from Pratulin (20 km NW of Brześć) to Drohiczyn on 2 August. The Bolshevik 8th and 27th Divisions, which also belonged to the Soviet 16th Army, thus made it to the left bank of the Bug River, intending to cut the line of retreat of the Polesie group by striking at Biała Podlaska, where the operational HQ of the Polesie group had been transferred after leaving Brześć.

Having received the news, I decided that it was pointless to keep the citadel, which required the forces of an entire infantry regiment. With the consent of the front command, I ordered its abandonment.

A counter-attack on Brześć was unrealistic in those conditions. The reinforcements obtained by emptying the citadel were concentrated in Biała, in order to organise an attack to the north, and to secure our communications to the west. This was all the more necessary because the position of the group worsened when on 2 August the neighbouring 14th Infantry Division, as ordered by the 4th Army command, retired to the Sarnaki – Terlików line, thus exposing the rear of my group.

### **Our Victories on the Middle Bug**

The Front Command initially ordered us not to fight the Red 16th Army from behind the Bug River, probably as a result of the consternation that the unexpected fall of Brześć caused in Warsaw, which did not help with the planned battle. The appointment of Colonel Ładoś of the General Staff as commander of the group's reserves in Biała, with the intention of using him for an independent action, and the constant lack of a decision as to who should lead the troops engaged in the operational area, hampered any action.

Nevertheless, on 3 August the Polesie group drove back across the Bug river those parts of the Soviet 16th Army that had crossed it near Brześć, inflicting heavy losses on them, and counter-attacked successfully in the direction of Pratulin. In the general scheme of events, however, this effort had no serious effect, for at the same time the enemy, acting with a concentrated mass, crossed the Bug near Granne and, after a heavy battle, forced the 1st Polish Army to retreat to Malkinia – Ostrów, at the same time throwing back to Ostrołęka a freshly organised but greatly outnumbered group under General Roja.

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<sup>8</sup> Count Tadeusz Jordan-Rozwadowski. Many consider that the eventual plan for the “Miracle on the Vistula” was largely his work.

<sup>9</sup> The Podhale Rifle units were in the Mountain Division (the word Podhale translates roughly to highlands).



On the following day, that is 4 August, we launched a counter-attack on Janów and Pratulin, working with General Konarzewski. The combined forces of the Polesie group and the 14th Infantry Division achieved local success there. At the same time, however, the Polesie group lost Terespol, and to the north the enemy drove back the Polish troops from near Drohiczyn and Granne to Sokołów and Kosów. Meanwhile our 1st Army found itself in a very difficult position between the Bug and Narew Rivers.

On 4 August the 14th Infantry Division was placed in the Polesie group. Our actions, given the conditions on the Bug, were successful for us from Terespol via Janów Podlaski up to Drohiczyn.

Especially successful was a combined attack of the 14th Infantry Division and units of the Polesie group on an enemy group in Janów, who we caught by surprise.

As a result of this battle, the victorious march of the Soviet 16th Army was halted, throwing it back over the Bug River. The defection of two Soviet regiments at Gnojno, coming over to the Polish side, was a telling sign that the hitherto victorious mood of that army was beginning to crumble. At the same time our 15th Infantry Division fought a hard battle at Sokołów, while General Żeligowski, having suffered heavy losses, succumbed to the enemy's superior numbers at Ostrów.

The Front Commander, General Józef Haller, seeing the southern section of the front established and now having the 14th Division free, intended to use it to strike from Sarnaki and Łosice down the Bug River to bring the situation near Sokołów under control. Then with a new concentric attack from Małkinia, Wyszaków and Ostrołęka take Ostrów and thus prevent the Russian Western Front from a movement that might flank us to the north. However, this risky plan was not carried out, as in the meantime a decision had been made by the Commander to move the war to the Vistula.

During the battles on the Bug River the Soviet 16th Army suffered such heavy losses that the retreat of the Polesie group and the neighbouring divisions was able to take place over the next three days in perfect order and without pressure from the enemy.

The battles on the Bug River described above, combined with the 1st Army's battles of 5 August near Malkinia, halted the movement of the Bolsheviks in the North from 29 July to 8 August, i.e., for a full ten days.

Almost at the same time, from 2 to 4 August, an equally major success was achieved on the southern front, where the 2nd Army, together with a cavalry group and the 18th Infantry Division, beat Budenny's Horse Army; the 18th Infantry Division was thus able to take Brody. However, this victory was not complete as our cavalry, in Budenny's rear, failed to make proper use of the situation, and even suffered a small check at Klekotow [Klekotiv] a bit later.

In any case, our first victorious battle on the north-eastern front since 4 July, together with the relatively successful relatively favourable turn of events with Budenny, had two important consequences for the war. Firstly, they boosted the confidence of the Polish soldiers involved and raised their morale, which had been dying due to the constant and often disorganised retreat. Also, by striking from the centre onto the flank of Tukhachevski's group of armies conducting the decisive attack, and by tying up the Horse Army, we delayed the advance of the Russian armies towards Warsaw and Lwów, at the same time as General Romer organised resistance on the Narew and Biebrza rivers. This gave the Commander-in-Chief time to think about future operations. And that time, used properly, was one of the most important factors in the final victory.

Finally, they enabled our troops to break away from the enemy and make a methodical retreat on the northern front for the first time since 4 July. They enabled our forces to regroup and form reserves. In brief, they contributed to the creation of the necessary conditions for the execution of the Commander-in-Chief's historic order of 6 August 1920.



## CHAPTER II

### The Russian March on Warsaw.

#### Crossing of the Neman and Bug rivers by the Russians

The Russian armies of the western front, having reached the Neman River in their victorious march, had two alternatives to choose from. One of them was to stop for a longer time in order to organise their supplies and to build up a new base, with a view to further operations. The other was to march immediately on Warsaw.

There were a number of obvious arguments in favour of the first alternative. First of all, despite the dramatic movements so far, the material condition and morale of the majority of the Polish Army at that time spoke in favour of it. Its prolonged resistance on the middle Bug River, and its unbroken energy on the south-eastern front, spoke volumes. These signs clearly contradicted the over-exaggerated Russian correspondence of the time. Facts contradicted the exaggerated words, as is often the case in war, and indicated that the Polish army was not broken across the whole front. This was also evidenced by the relatively small number of Polish prisoners of war, by the small amount of war material taken (basically only on the north-eastern section of the front), by the generally accurate and in some cases rigorous evacuation of the operational areas lying south of Mińsk – with a methodical destruction of bridges and communications hubs). Despite the panic-stricken retreat of the majority of divisions on the north-eastern front, all these symptoms indicated that the Poles' will for victory was not yet broken. While advancing deep into the Republic of Poland it was therefore necessary to anticipate that a decisive battle was yet to come, which the Poles would likely organise from the interior of the country. It was necessary to prepare the armies for that up-coming major battle by putting units in order, filling them up with recruits and organising a further advance based on a reliable material base adapted to the new conditions, so that a pursuit which might rely in the first phase on speed of action, would be provided with adequate strength for the follow-up.

The military specialists on the Russian side spoke in favour of the first alternative. But what value could their arguments have in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, against the arguments of the political commissars at the front who, for understandable reasons, wanted to take Warsaw as quickly as possible, at any cost? And in the opinion of the latter, the victorious will of the people would overcome all difficulties, the exaggeration of which by "experts" (specialists) is nothing else but a betrayal of the revolution.

The Commissars were persuaded of the demoralisation of the Polish Army: their conviction was based on things such as the disordered recoil of some of our divisions, the rapid fall of Wilno, and the ease with which Grodno was taken by a party of Red cavalry during the pursuit. They wanted to achieve the decomposition of the Polish army by the immediate capture of Warsaw.

Indeed, these days an army in the field has much stronger and deeper roots in the national body than it could ever have had in the past. The links between the army, the nation and the state are now so important that the severing of some of them may determine its combat capability, or even its very existence. In the circumstances we faced, the capture of Warsaw, as the capital of the young State, would indeed bring about incalculable repercussions in the morale of the Polish Army. It might well have been a fatal blow, for a reborn army and nation with traditions that were still very fragile.

Moreover, Warsaw represented one of the most important centres of Polish material strength. Destroying it was tantamount to winning a great battle in an open field. Taking the war so deeply into the interior of the country by the enemy would resolve some of the issues which will be mentioned later, and did indeed constitute legitimate strategic goals.

What was a mistake however – and the cause of their later disasters – was the excessive speed with which Warsaw was to be taken. Both Tukhachevski in the north and Budenny in the south were too hasty, the former rushing towards Warsaw and the latter towards Lwów. Both were driven by revolutionary-communist and political premises, rather than military motives.

Besides this, it is difficult not to think the course of the international conference in then taking place in Spa. Poland's isolation revealed there was one of the factors that excited the imagination of the Soviet leaders.

That loneliness, and their knowledge of the general European situation at that time, resulted in Lord Curzon's note sent to Moscow on 11 July 1920 – proposing Britain's mediation in peace negotiations between Poland and Russia with a ceasefire on the Neman and Bug rivers – finding no takers on the Russian side.

The same fate befell Curzon's repeated proposal of 18 July 1920. The Soviet government took it as a proof of the weakness of the Polish State and an expression of the English government's fear of world revolution. Moscow did agree around 20 July to start negotiations with Poland, it is true. This agreement, however, very soon turned out to be a sham. The Polish government's delegates sent to Mińsk on 22 July encountered such harassment and received such





provocative terms for a truce that, despite the tragic situation of the Polish army, they were forced to save the State's honour and returned to Warsaw with nothing.

On the other hand, by postponing and later breaking off those negotiations, the Soviets showed their true intentions. They frantically rushed their troops forward, with the sole aim of penetrating as quickly as possible into Poland, which they believed was isolated and ripe for collapse.

### **The Consequences of the Premature Crossing the Neman and the Bug**

The Red leaders were truly blinded by political and psychological considerations. When crossing the Neman and Bug rivers in the first days of August 1920, they underestimated the danger that this bold decision entailed. They also made an error frequently seen in the civil war in Russia – an error committed by both sides' armies, but above all by the counter-revolutionary armies which, for the most part, lost the war because they underestimated the importance of supply and the rear. Nor did they realise the difficult situation of an army dispersed across an excessive front, deprived of the needs of life and lacking material resources.

In the revolutionary way, the organisation of the material side of Tukhachevski's offensive was not up to the ambitious tasks demanded of it. He himself, as the observed facts show, did not attach sufficient importance to the material aspects of war. This had an effect in the operations of which he was in charge, with the subordinate commands and staffs proving to be less prepared for mastering supply issues.

Already by the time they reached the Bug and Neman the supply chain of the Red Army was in serious difficulty. The further advance of the armies in the north multiplied these deficiencies to such an unprecedented degree that its momentum exceeded the forces at the Russian commander's disposal. Most of all, the speed and depth of his attack was in flagrant disproportion to the possibility of supplying ammunition and foodstuffs to the fighting armies, which were moving dangerously far from their base of supply.

It is true that the Russian armies, advancing westward after crossing the Neman river, followed the main rail lines. But they were unable to use what is still the most important means of transport in war, despite the modern increase in motorisation. The main lines of Grodno – Białystok – Warsaw and Brześć – Warsaw, as well as the lines connecting them, which had together constituted a rail network sufficient to serve the Russian western front in the Great War, had to remain unused. It was impossible to put them into operation due to the excessive speed of the Russian armies, the impossibility of changing the narrow-gauge lines quickly [to fit Russian rolling stock], our demolition of the bridges and because we evacuated the [narrow gauge] rolling stock behind the Vistula. There was no getting around the fact that the last accessible major railway stations, which became the westernmost permanent bases of the Russian supply system, would remain on the Neman and Bug rivers. They remained the bases of the armies advancing to the Vistula, and trains with men and supplementary war material had to stop there.

As a result of this state of affairs, on 14 August the Russians had to organise from those points the transport of food and ammunition over a distance of up to 400 kilometres to the right wing of their front.

It was also impossible to use the existing waterways, that is the rivers Narew and Bug which ran parallel to the Russian army's axis of march, because they lacked the necessary boats. As the Russian armies at that time did not have trucks in any numbers, almost their entire transport was based on columns of wagons, with the improvised help of local carts.

It was possible to feed horses and people off the country during the harvest period, by means of ruthless requisitioning of foodstuffs and cattle. It was also possible to supply the wounded with local resources, supplemented by some deliveries. However, it is impossible to wage war on the basis of such a long and thin supply line, given the modern consumption of ammunition, increased immeasurably by the multiplication of machine-guns, and the demands of other modern weapons.

Thus, the calculations made at that time by the Red General Staff in this matter were based not on science, but on fantasy – which demands a terrible revenge in war. As a result, in the course of their movement westwards, Tukhachevski's armies lost more and more of its operational freedom as a consequence of the excessive burden on their supply train, while its combat value diminished in parallel with the intimidating lengthening of the supply lines and the simultaneous gradual depletion of ammunition reserves.

The progression of the armies of the Soviet Western Front also immensely complicated the already existing difficulties in communication. The 4th Army, for example, covered about 650 km from the Auta River to Ciechanów, and that in the space of five weeks. It was impossible to organise a properly functioning longitudinal and transverse communication system over such distances. Initially, they relied on the permanent telegraph lines. After crossing the Neman River, however, this system was seriously disturbed, as the fixed telegraph lines no longer coincided with the lines of communication of individual armies and divisions. It is not secure to rely on radios for military operations. Moreover, as happened in Ciechanów with the radio station of the Soviet 4th Army, it is easy to destroy such



equipment, and then the units deprived of any other means of communication will act in an uncoordinated manner, risking inevitable failures.

From all these considerations, without looking at those of an operational nature, which will be discussed later in this study, it is clear that it was a reckless decision of the Russian command to cross the Neman and Bug rivers without a pause in the first days of August 1920. It compromised the strength of the Russian Western Front, which starting from the concentration on the Auta, was powerful and rational up to reaching the Neman and Bug. The Bolshevik plan, while logical in its strategic objectives, was rushing headlong into an irreparable disaster.

