

The Self-Organization of Ukrainian Soldiers Interned in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the Aftermath of the Great War

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Introduction

The First World War and the collapse of the Russian Empire brought to light nations ready to fight for their nationhood and defend it to the hilt. During the years 1917-1918, Poland, Finland, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and other former colonial nations restored their statehoods or emerged as independent states.

However, it was not only the national-patriotic forces that were fighting for the governing power in the independent republics. The armed and political opposition of the young Ukrainian state to the Bolsheviks lasted four years. The signing of the preliminary treaty in November 1920 and the final treaty in Riga in March 1921 between Poland and the Soviet authority determined the historical course of Ukraine's struggle for independence. Without military support, the UNR Ukrainian National Republic or Ukrainian People's Republic army was forced to retreat to Poland and passed the Zbruch River on 21 November 1920.

Within two months, the disarmed and interned UNR Army was sent to the camps, which were overcrowded by almost 100,000 Bolshevik prisoners.¹ Also, the Russian anti-Soviet forces of Borys Savinkov (1879-1925), led by General Stanislav Bulak-Balakhovych (1883-1940), Cossack forces led by Captain Mykhailo (Vadym) Yakovlev (?-1941), as well as Belorussian troops were interned there. In October 1920, the total number of prisoners was around 40,000.² From the earliest days of their settlement, the Ukrainian veterans were put in terrible living conditions, and also suffered from moral neglect

1 Zbigniew Karpus, *Jeńcy i internowani rosyjscy i ukraińscy w Polsce w latach 1918-1924: z dziejów militarno-politycznych wojny polsko-radzieckiej* [*Prisoners and Interned Russians and Ukrainians in Poland in 1918-1924: From the Military-Political History of the Polish-Soviet War*] (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 1991), 49.

2 Zbigniew Karpus, *Wschodni sojusznicy Polski w wojnie 1920 roku: oddziały wojskowe ukraińskie, rosyjskie, kozackie i białoruskie w Polsce w latach 1919-1920* [*Eastern Poland's Allies in the War of*

from some of the Bolshevik prisoners and the Polish camps' administration, who considered them to be yet another set of Bolshevik or Galician prisoners.³

At the beginning of December 1920 the Ministry of War issued instructions on the treatment of the internees from Poland's former allies. The instructions were covered in 23 paragraphs. The interpretation of paragraph 5 was that the administration of the camps in Poland would be the responsibility of the nationalities held in the camps. The Ukrainian and White Russian officers and officials would be strictly segregated from the Red Army prisoners. In the area of every camp, according to Paragraph 7, there would be internal autonomy organised along military lines, i.e. according to platoons, companies, battalions and regiments. For the internal discipline and maintenance of order in each camp, the three highest ranks of officers would act as the intermediaries with the Polish authorities. Paragraph 13 of the instructions stated that in order to assist with the maintenance of order in the camps, each internal camp administration would be expected to organise athletic and sporting events, elementary education, other courses of instruction, libraries, drama groups, carpentry shops, tailoring etc. Apart from keeping the internees occupied, these courses were obviously intended to provide some form of training for the time when the prisoners would eventually be liberated.⁴

Altogether, during the internment period, almost 50,000 Ukrainian refugees, prisoners, and internees were in Poland. The social structure of the immigrants contained a very high percentage of soldiers and intelligence officials. According to Pavlo Shandruk, there were nearly 30,000 exiled veterans in Poland,⁵ a figure which was corroborated by Zbigniew Karpus.⁶ This number includes more than 4,000 officers and nearly 100 generals.⁷ We should

1920: *Ukrainian, Russian, Cossack and Belarussian Military Units in Poland in 1919-1920*] (Toruń: Uniwersitet Mikołaja Kopernika, 1999), 216.

3 Roman Zinkievič, "Ukraińska emigracja wojskowa w Polsce w latach 1920-1939" ["Ukrainian Military Emigration in Poland in 1920-1939"], *Wieki Stare i Nowe*, Special Issue (2012), 59-74.

4 Joseph Healy, "Central Europe in Flux: Germany, Poland and Ukraine, 1918-1922" (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2003), 225.

5 Pavlo Shandruk, "Ukrainska armiya v borotbi z Moskovshinoju (18 zhovtnya-21 listopada 1920)" ["The Ukrainian Army in the Fight against Moscow (18 October-21 November 1920)"], *For the Statehood* 4 (1934), 234.

6 Karpus, *Wschodni sojusznicy Polski*.

7 Aleksander Kolańczuk, Mykola Lytvyn and Kim Naumenko, *Generalitet ukraïnskykh vyzvolnyh zmaganiï 1917-1945* [*Generals of the Ukrainian Liberation Movement 1917-1945*] (Lviv: