

Combat involvement of Poland's 27th Infantry Division of the Volhynia Home Army against the UPA in the light of the 27th's entire combat trail

The course of the organization and combat operations of the 27th Infantry Division of the Volhynia Home Army (*27 Wołyńska Dywizja Piechoty Armii Krajowej*, 27 WDP AK) in Volhynia is relatively well-known in our military history. The authors of the most important publications – in this case, also the most comprehensive – are those of soldiers of the 27th WDP AK - namely: Władysław Filar, Michał Fijałka, and Józef Turowski. Polish archival resources are not sufficient to assess the fundamental findings, conclusions, and observations found in this work. The reader can only assert that the knowledge of Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-German battles in Volhynia in 1943–1944 is based on studies written by their participants. Examination of archives in Kiev and Moscow would be, therefore, essential for a more comprehensive assessment of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, one that would address issues such as: a) the source of the Ukrainian decision to eradicate the Polish population from the provinces of Volhynia, Lviv, Ternopil, and Stanisławów; b) the losses suffered by the Polish and Ukrainian communities; c) the prevalence of Ukrainian, Soviet, and Polish armed forces in the area; and d) the intensity of the battles.

This article is an attempt to review Polish historiography concerning combat operations of the 27th WDP AK against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrayinska Povstanska Armiya*, UPA). It consists of two parts: the first section describes the operations of Polish self-defense and guerrilla units which eventually became part of the 27th WDP AK; the second addresses battles fought by their soldiers after they had joined the 27th. The author believes and thus proposes the hypothesis that initially the main objective of Polish guerrilla and self-defense troops was to defend the lives of Poles and their material resources. The formation of the 27th WDP AK meant changing the priorities of the Polish armed operations. Its main goal was to safeguard the reconstruction of state administration structures as the German occupation institutions were collapsing and Soviet troops were encroaching.

The intensification of the UPA's armed attacks against Polish civilians in Volhynia in the spring of 1943 marked the beginning of the extermination of Poles. This led Polish settlements organizing their self-defense, as well as to underground resistance structures being formed more quickly. This warrants several observations. In mid-1943, the relatively small Polish population of Volhynia, weakened earlier in the war by the series of deportations carried out by the Soviet occupying forces and arrests by the Germans, was incapable of larger-scale acts of aggression against the Ukrainians. Poles sought only to create temporary and initially makeshift tools to defend their lives and property, while the civil and military leadership centers of the Polish Underground had to devote their attention and efforts to preparing for the reconstruction of state institutions before the invasion of the Red Army (Operation "Tempest"). Polish-Ukrainian relations and the tragic fate of Volhynia Poles were important to the Underground. Compared to the future state affiliation of the four south-eastern provinces of prewar Poland, however, these issues were considered of secondary significance. Nonetheless, the Home Army High Command feared that the Ukrainians would attempt to create their own state administration, which would ultimately lead to the outbreak of Polish-Ukrainian armed conflict in Volhynia, in eastern Małopolska, and the Polesie region. The High Command expected that by focusing the efforts of

their troops on eliminating the German occupation, they would be the weaker party in the armed conflict with the Ukrainians, at least in the first phase thereof. Therefore, the AK attached greater importance on holding Lviv and Eastern Małopolska than Volhynia.

The scope and intensity of the Ukrainian nationalists' operation against Poles surprised the Volhynian Delegation of the Polish Government and the Home Army regional command. Compelled by the rapidly expanding UPA operations in the early summer of 1943, Polish underground structures were partially reorganized. First of all, some members of urban cells remained in conspiracy. A lot of effort was invested in creating bases and self-defense centers in villages, by necessity of a semi-overt, and sometimes entirely overt nature. By the end of June, most likely 25 such formations had been formed, the strongest of them being in Przebraże, Huta Stepańska, Pańska Dolina, Zasmyki, and Bielino. In July, subsequent centers were established, including the following settlements: Werba, Nowosiółki, Falemicze, Suchodoły, Włodzimierzówka, Chobułtowa, and Iwanicze. The number of active self-defense centers in Volhynia is unknown. One of the researchers examining the Volhynian self-defense counted about 300 such centers, of which 129 survived the Red Army's invasion in the area.

The emergence of self-defense centers and of mobile, albeit small partisan units made it possible to oppose the UPA's extermination campaign. One form of Polish activity was that of attacking Ukrainian bases and villages which, as it was believed, could support the enemy's military operations. One of the first such attacks was carried out by the defenders of Przebraże, who briefly took Trościaniec, where a UPA non-commissioned officers school was located. Some of the most mobile and resourceful Polish partisan groups were the ones led by Lt. Władysław Czermiński aka "Jastrząb" (the Hawk) and Lt. Kazimierz Filipowicz aka "Kord", operating in the districts of Luboml and Kowel.

On July 19, 1943, the commander of the Home Army Volhynia District, Colonel Kazimierz Babinski aka "Luboń" ordered National Security Corps to come under his command, and a day later he gave an order to establish guerrilla troops capable of supporting the self-defense centers. These guerilla troops were to achieve combat ability as early as by July 28. As a result, certain such units were formed, and they amassed about 1,300 soldiers. The strongest one (with about 500 soldiers) was led by Captain Władysław Kocharński, aka "Bomba" (the Bomb) or "Wujek" (Uncle).

Attempts to arrange talks with the Ukrainians, undertaken at the initiative of the Regional Delegate of the Government, Kazimierz Banach, probably against the opinion of Colonel Babinski, brought an unexpected outcome. The Polish representatives Zygmunt Rumel aka "Krzysztof Poręba" and Krzysztof Markiewicz aka "Czart" were murdered on July 10, 1943 in Kustycze near Kowel. This was a personal failure for Banach, who up to that point had believed in the possibility of reaching some sort of agreement with the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist underground.

The tragic death of Zygmunt Rumel and Krzysztof Markiewicz did not change the attitude of the regional Delegation of the Government toward the most important elements of the deepening Polish-Ukrainian antagonism. On July 28, 1943, the Polish authorities issued an address to Poles stating that collaboration with Germans and Bolsheviks is a crime against the nation. It also warned that those guilty of the death of Ukrainian women and children, as well as of the destruction of farms, would be severely punished.

Commanders of Polish partisan groups were required to follow the orders of Colonel

Babiński, who strictly prohibited any repressions against women and children. It was for a drastic violation of these orders that Lt. Mikołaj Bałysz aka “Zagłoba” had cadet Tadeusz Korona aka “Halicz” stand before martial court. Korona was sentenced to death, but his life was spared by the intervention of the Kowel area inspector, Major Jan Szatowski aka “Kowal” (“Zagończyk”). Today, it is impossible to determine with any accuracy how many partisans might have been guilty of similar crimes. Polish writings on the subject usually support the belief that they were few such incidents, incomparable with those of the UPA in its operations against the Polish population of Volhynia’s villages and towns.

The Metropolitan of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, Andrey Sheptytsky, urged UPA soldiers to stop the massacres of Polish citizens in Volhynia in a letter dated August 10, 1943. The chairman of the Central Committee of Ukraine, Volodymyr Kubiyovych, made a similar appeal. The pleas of both these authority figures failed to discourage the Ukrainian nationalists to bring an end to the UPA operations against Polish villages.

The dozen-some Polish guerrilla groups had a positive effect on the fate of only some Polish villages and towns. They could not, for obvious reasons, stop UPA operations across Volhynia. However, service in these units, as well as in self-defense formations, proved to be a good training school in warfare for Operation “Tempest”. The skills and experience gained by soldiers during the confrontations of late-1943 contributed to the efficiency of the 27th WDP AK. At the same time, together with joining the 27th, the soldiers of the first guerrilla units and members of self-defense formations brought their personal, often very dramatic experiences and traumas associated with the tragedy of the Polish population of Volhynia.

The Red Army’s advancement on the Polish borders increased the responsibilities of the Volhynia District’s Home Army command, who now had to proceed to implement Operation “Tempest”. District structures received their first orders for mobilization and the concentration of troops as early as in 1943. As a result, between December 1943 and January 1944, the following units were formed: south of Kovel – “Gromada”, led by Major Szatowski and north of Włodzimierz Wołyński – “Osnowa” led by Kazimierz Rzaniak, aka “Garda”. The Volhynia District’s Home Army command was reorganized into division command and, on January 28, 1944, adopted the name: the 27th WDP AK. Its first commander was Colonel Babiński. Approximately on February 10, this position was taken over by the young Major Jan W. Kiwerski aka “Oliwa” (born in 1910), a nonetheless experienced soldier of the Underground (he organized the Home Army’s day-to-day combat, he also led operation “Wieniec” on the night of December 31, 1942 - January 1, 1943). Kiwerski, sent to Volhynia from Warsaw, completed forming the division, ultimately establishing its organizational structure and assigning key important command positions. The position of divisional chief of staff went to Major Tadeusz Sztumberk-Rychter aka “Żegota”.

In a relatively short time, over six-thousand people joined the ranks of the 27th WDP AK. Its core, especially in January and February 1944, comprised soldiers from the original guerrilla troops and self-defense formations. Soon they teamed up with soldiers with different histories in conspiracy, including arrivals from outside Volhynia. About 3-thousand conspirators for various reasons never reached the rendezvous point.

Some forces (about 600 Home Army soldiers?) remained in the self-defense bases, but it is difficult to estimate how many today. Most of these were deliberately excluded from mobilization. There were also cases of some self-defense commands sabotaging mobilization orders, as they feared the Ukrainian troops might make avail of the weakening of the Polish

centers.

The 27th WDP AK troops, concentrated in designated areas, fought at least a dozen battles and skirmishes with Ukrainian units when passing through zones controlled by the UPA. Let us mention two such confrontations: that of December 23, 1943, in the village of Witoniz, and the group "Łuna" led by Lt. Zygmunt Kulczycki "Olgierd"; and that of the night of January 11–12, 1944, near Sady Małe, when the unit of Colonel Franciszek Pukacki aka "Gzyms" managed to break out of an encirclement. There were also skirmishes and major battles with Ukrainian police and Wehrmacht troops – for example, on January 15 near Rakowiec, and on January 17 near the Piatydnie estate. We can assume that Germans received relatively detailed information about Polish troops from Ukrainian informants. Another tragic event was the meeting with Soviet General Naumov's partisan group. Soviet partisans invited to their camp Cpt. Władysław Kochański with four officers and thirteen non-commissioned officers and privates. These Poles were then disarmed, eleven of them were executed, and Cpt. Kochański with the other survivors were then moved to the Soviet front line and imprisoned.

Battles fought from mid-January by the 27th WDP AK forces (still being formed) were meant to establish a base of operations that would allow the plan for Operation "Tempest" to be carried out. This required removing all UPA troops from the area, forcing the occupant to stay locked up in larger garrisons, and limiting all activity to the protection and maintenance of transport routes. Moreover, Polish troops were to maintain as correct relations as possible with Soviet partisans. Defense of the Polish population against possible attacks by the UPA was also part of this phase of operations.

Orders and instructions received by the 27th WDP AK command precluded engaging in fights against Red Army units invading Polish lands. In case the Soviet command rejected the offer of cooperation and if a threat of armed confrontation arose, the orders were to hide weapons and disband units.

The formation of a large and mobile Polish military force behind the front line changed the balance of power, of course on a local scale, weakening the position of the German army and UPA groups. In such circumstances, the German command tried to conduct operations eliminating partisan formations behind their lines, sometimes mobilizing significant resources for that purpose. In the first weeks of 1944, however, they did not have sufficient forces in Volhynia to make such an operation possible and so all such efforts had to be limited to short-term military ventures against partisans. Battles fought against German units on February 15 and 23 in the region of Włodzimierz Wołyński and Wodzinów demonstrated the efficiency and firepower of the Polish formation. One major success of the Polish forces was that of surrounding a German unit comprised of 105 men in Zasmyki and forcing it to surrender. Attempts to turn Polish troops against the Soviets, initiated by German commanders, were categorically rejected. In this situation, German units threatened by Polish, Soviet, and Ukrainian troops were concentrated in larger cities, including Kowel, Łuck, Włodzimierz Wołyński, Luboml, and Uściług. They also organized the defense of the most important railway routes: Kowel–Równe, Kowel–Luboml–Chełm, Włodzimierz Wołyński–Kowel, and the Kowel–Łuck road.

Capturing a settlement with a German garrison turned out to be a very difficult but feasible task for the 27th WDP AK. The carefully planned attack on Hołoby to acquire military equipment and ammunition on the night of March 8-9, 1944 ended in complete defeat, caused mostly by lack of cooperation between troops designated to attack. The March 20 attack on the

town and railway station of Turzysk was, in contrast, successful. It should be noted that the success of Polish troops was in part due to the assistance of Soviet artillery. Also successful was the attack on the town and station of Turopin, manned by German troops. Seizure of these two towns interrupted the railway connection between German garrisons in Kowel and Włodzimierz Wołyński. “These operations helped build camaraderie in the 27th Division and reinforced the belief”, as the writing team of the Polish Historical Committee of the General Staff in London rightly assessed after the war, “that despite disparities in weaponry, the regular German army can be successfully confronted in open battle.”

It was not only the German units that threatened the still-forming 27th WDP AK, as the UPA was just as dangerous. Polish forces engaged the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in a series of offensive combat actions, dispatching considerable, relatively well-armed forces. One of the first such confrontations was on January 10–15, 1944. Units from the “Osnowa” formation carried out reconnaissance in force in the area north of Włodzimierz Wołyński, engaging in several skirmishes with the UPA. Larger armed clashes took place on January 18–19, also in the vicinity of Włodzimierz Wołyński. The command of the “Osnowa” group intended to seize control of the city and destroy the UPA base in Gnojno. The operation was a failure. Poles were unable to break the enemy's defense and retreated to Bielin and Siedlisko. In response, on January 25, Ukrainian soldiers from Gnojno retaliated and attacked the Polish base in Bielin. The attack was repelled, but fierce fighting and the temporary seizure of some Polish villages (including Helenówka, Stefanówka, Andresówka, and Białozowszczyzna) caused death among Polish civilians. In February “Osnowa” units provided assistance to self-defense centers in Edwardopolu (February 8), and managed to take UPA bases in Worczyn, Puzów, and Stężarzyce (February 20). In early March a unit led by II Lt. Jerzy Krasowski aka “Lech” won a confrontation during reconnaissance operations near Hajki.

Also successful were the first two operations carried out by the “Gromada” formation. In late January, its troops went to the east side of the Stochód River and broke the Ukrainian defense in the villages of Szczurzyn and Babie. They came out unscathed from an enemy ambush. Another successful attack on Budyszcze near Kowel was carried out on January 31, 1944.

The greatest achievement of “Gromada” was the removal of UPA troops from the Świnarzyński forest. This was done with the cooperation of Soviet partisans. Facing stronger opponents, the Ukrainians did not make any serious attempts at resistance. They withdrew, leaving behind earth fortifications and empty warehouses. Operations in the Świnarzyński forest were continued on February 16, with an attack on Ośmigowicze, where a strong UPA unit was said to be stationed. The attack was halted by heavy machinegun fire, and after the fight it turned out that the opponent was in fact a Soviet guerilla unit which had taken control of the village two days earlier. Another defeat was the February 29 attack on a UPA base in Oździutycze. The attackers suffered significant losses from machineguns and mortars. The Poles, clearly visible in the snow, were also bombarded by three German planes, which further contributed to the defeat. They had likely been sent to identify the situation and eventually joined in the fight. The attack on Przekórka carried out on February 29 by Colonel Kazimierz Filipowicz aka “Kord” and his troops was, on the other hand, a success. The settlement was captured and the enemy was forced to flee. “Gromada” soldiers were also victorious in battles of Korytnica (March 12) and Zapole (March 13).

From January 11 to March 18, 1944, soldiers of the 27th WDP AK fought in 16 major battles. The largest ones included operations in the Świnarzyński forest, in which four Polish battalions

were involved. The 27th gained the space necessary to complete its organization and training, and to get its lines in order before fighting the German army.

In late March, the 27th WDP AK was in the front-line area. On March 17, 20, and 26, majors Szatowski, Sztumberk-Rychter, and Kiwerski met with senior Soviet officers and the first provisional principles of cooperation between Polish and Soviet troops were established, though they were not approved officially by the Home Army High Command and the Polish government-in-exile. Representatives of the Red Army declared, inter alia, that they recognized that the 27th WDP AK was politically accountable to the Polish authorities in London (where the government-in-exile has its seat) and Warsaw. They gave their consent to maintaining unhindered communication between the 27th's command and its political and military superiors, along with its reorganization into a regular unit, promising to provide equipment and weaponry. They demanded, however, that the Division submit to Soviet command as regards operations. There were to be no Polish partisan troops operating at the rear of the Red Army. The Russians had quite detailed information about the mood and expectations of Polish soldiers, their numbers, weaponry, and the location of the 27th's units. They also knew the location of certain self-defense centers and members of their command.

In spite of the amenable course of talks between senior leaders of the 27th WDP AK and representatives of the Red Army, certain serious incidents did occur, ones that revealed the attitude of partisans and the Soviet army to the Polish population. On March 15, 1944, the commander of the Home Army sent an alarming telegram to London: "Volhynia reports - 1) Bolsheviks disarmed our base in the town of Przebraże. [...] Some of the people were arrested, leaders were executed. On March 9, in the town of Rożyszcze, the commander and three men were shot, and about 20 were arrested and taken to Łuck, some were hanged. 3) Young people are being conscripted into their units." Information about the executions of Polish conspirators was not always true. However, much of the information about ongoing arrests, imprisonment, and the deportations of local Polish community leaders into the Soviet Union was, indeed, true.

In the early spring of 1944, the 27th's command basically had no choice: in commencing Operation "Tempest", they had to cooperate with Soviet units. At the same time, the Polish side did not know the Soviets' true intentions, structure, and firepower, based as their information was on data received only from Soviet officers. The issue of the loyalty of Soviet units in the vicinity of Polish soldiers remained an open question.

Front-line fighting with regular German units began in early April. After about two weeks of battling the opponent's larger and stronger forces, and not getting enough support from the Soviet troops, the 27's attack broke down. The Soviet leadership did not authorize withdrawal to the line of the Turia River. As a result, on April 13-19, Polish soldiers were forced to carry out defensive operations in the Mosur, Ziemlice, and Stężarzyce forests, then breached the siege ring and moved to the north of Lubom. In late April, they went to the Szack forest, where Soviet partisan units were also stationed.

On April 18, under circumstances that remain unclear, Major Kiwerski was killed. Command over the 27 WDP AK (about 3,300 soldiers) went to Major Sztumberk-Rychter. He also carried out the orders of the Home Army Commander, General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski: "The next task of these troops will be to continue Operation "Tempest" east of the Bug River, for as long as possible". At that time, General Bór-Komorowski had already realized that divisions might need to be relocated to the Lublin region.

The 27th WDP AK was in a very difficult situation. After May 20, the German enemy began

liquidating Polish and Soviet partisan groups. Acute shortages of ammunition, medical supplies, and food forced the decision to fight their way out of the encirclement. In the absence of the AK High Command's consent to move to the Lublin region, Division leaders decided to move their troops to the Russian side of the front. They had just started relocating when Major. Sztumberk-Rychter received instructions over the radio to cross the Bug River.

The new orders of the AK High Command reached only a few units, which then turned back and withdrew. On the night of June 9-10, 1944, they crossed the Bug at three points, reached the Parczew forest and then penetrated into the Czemiernice forest. In July they took part in operation "Tempest" in the Lublin region. They liberated the area, including the towns of Kock, Firlej, Lubartów, and Kamionka. On July 25-30, 1944, they were treacherously disarmed by the 8th Guards Army of the 1st Byelorussian Front acting on a directive of the Soviet Supreme Command Headquarters dated July 14, 1944, which ordered Soviet forces to disarm Polish partisan troops and direct them to special camps. In case Polish partisans and Home Army soldiers refused to submit to Soviet orders, armed violence was to be used against them.

Even more tragic was the fate of the unit commanded by Cpt. Rzaniak. Orders directing the 27th WDP AK to the Lublin area probably never reached him. On the attempt to cross the Prypeć River, 120 Polish soldiers were killed and 114 wounded. The losses amounted to about 40 percent of the unit.

Establishment of the 27th WDP AK in Volhynia, a large Polish military formation, did not dramatically deteriorate the situation of the Ukrainian population. There is nothing in reliable sources and/or Polish publications on the subject that would suggest that the soldiers of the 27th WDP AK carried out any large scale pacification of the Ukrainian population in which women and children were killed. Such information found in Ukrainian publications is usually quoted without providing sources. However, given the intensity of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Volhynia and the tragic fate of the 27th's soldiers' families in 1943, it cannot be ruled out that in 1944 there may have been some cases (perhaps even relatively numerous) of Ukrainian civilians being shot and their belongings being destroyed.

The primary objective of the 27th WDP AK was to fight German forces and facilitate the reconstruction of Polish state administration in the Volhynia region. The Division's soldiers were unable to accomplish this task, particularly in the political dimension.

After an agreement with the local Red Army leadership, the 27th WDP AK was involved in the Kowel operation in April. As a result of this and further fighting, the Division incurred significant losses and, as a result, it was surrounded by the Germans in the Szack forest. For many reasons listed earlier, it was impossible for the Division to stay in Volhynia. Ultimately, some Polish troops crossed the Bug River and then took part in operation "Tempest" in the Lublin region. Those soldiers had the honor of liberating dozens of towns and villages. However, at the end of July 1944, they were treacherously disarmed by the Soviet troops of the 29th Guards Infantry Corps. Stalin himself is said to have known about this. Most soldiers were drafted into the Polish People's Army, subordinated to the Red Army. Refusal to continue the fight against the Germans in this formation was punishable by arrest and deportation to the Soviet Union.

It should be emphasized that the 27th WDP AK was the largest Polish guerrilla unit involved with Operation "Tempest" in the first half of 1944. It traversed a distance of approximately 600 km, and took part in fierce combat. It joined in about 60 major battles. During these, 625 soldiers were killed and about 400 were wounded, 195 were taken prisoners, and 1,320 went missing.

Historians estimate that the German losses amounted to 700-750 soldiers killed and 900-1,000 wounded. Approximately 350 enemy soldiers were taken prisoner by the Polish forces .

The 27th WDP AK was engaged in combat against the UPA only in the first period of its operation (the last days of 1943 and the first weeks of 1944). This was a very important episode along the battle trail, but merely an episode nevertheless. The basic purpose of these confrontations was to create an operational base for operations against German troops and to defend Polish villages against the UPA. During the fighting, the 27th did not suffer any major casualties. Further research into the history of the Volhynia Division, primarily based on Ukrainian and Russian archival resources, is unlikely to change that finding.