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Polish National Units in Russia

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The Polish Army was born out of the chaos of revolutionary Russia. The Russian authorities accepted its establishment, and later the army sought an agreement with the occupying Germans. Polish units found themselves in a complicated legal and military situation, subjected to the political strategies and suspicions of Germans and Bolsheviks.

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The Creation of Polish Units in Russia

After the [March Revolution in 1917](#), Poles who served as Russian soldiers began organizing their own military units. There were about 500,000 Poles in the Russian army, among them 20,000 officers and 119 generals at that time. Polish soldiers began to form unions, which in turn organized political meetings. The First Assembly of the Polish military took place in Petrograd on 7–22 June 1917, during which the Chief Polish Military Committee was established. This institution was supposed to assemble Polish military delegates and represent them. In August 1917, the Chief Committee gained the acceptance of the Russian army's commander-in-chief, General [Lavr Kornilov \(1870–1918\)](#), for the creation of the Polish I Corps. The organizations of Polish soldiers also appeared on the Romanian front, in Bessarabia, and in Bukovina, where in autumn 1917 the Polish II Corps was established. The main goal was the creation of a military force to enable Polish soldiers to return to the Polish Kingdom.

The Polish I Corps in Belorussia

The Polish I Corps was formed in January 1918 in Belorussia, near Bobruisk, by General [Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki \(1867–1937\)](#). The military conflict between Polish soldiers and Bolshevik forces broke out soon after, and the Polish I Corps suffered heavy losses. Therefore, when the Germans arrived in the area, Dowbór-Muśnicki negotiated, eventually reaching an arrangement and signing a convention on 26 February 1918. The Polish I Corps was to leave its former base with the supplies. The Germans recognized the existence of the Polish I Corps as separate units, its new jurisdiction, and its [neutrality](#). They also accepted that the Polish I Corps made an oath of loyalty to the Regency Council in Warsaw.

This German policy changed quickly on 3 March 1918 when the Central Powers signed a peace treaty with Bolshevik [Russia](#) in [Brest-Litovsk](#). At that time, [Germany](#) would not tolerate the existence of an independent military formation in the rear. Dowbór-Muśnicki attempted to secure political protection for the corps from the Regency Council. The Germans intervened in the internal affairs of the corps, accusing it of causing conflicts with the indigenous Belorussian population and contributing to Bolshevik demoralization. In May 1918, Germany firmly demanded the dissolution of the corps. In this situation, Muśnicki wanted to evacuate eastwards, but the Regency Council insisted on the continuation of negotiations. On 21 May 1918, German soldiers surrounded the whole corps with 24,000 men and demanded its demobilization. Finally, General Dowbór-Muśnicki signed the demobilization act, aiming to avoid the bloodshed and submit to the instructions of the Regency Council. The majority of the corps' officers and soldiers returned to the Polish Kingdom as private citizens. The Germans confiscated their [weapons](#). In November 1918 the veterans of the Polish I Corps joined the Polish army.

The Polish II and III Corps in the Ukraine

The Executive Committee of Polish Soldiers in Kishinev received permission from the Russian commander-in-chief of the Romanian front to form a few independent Polish units. The staff of Russian XXIX Corps, commanded by General [Eugeniusz de Henning-Michaelis \(1863–1939\)](#), was renamed the "Polish II Corps." The Poles were separated from individual squads and recruited to new units. General de Henning-Michaelis became the inspector of Polish Military Forces in [Ukraine](#) and appointed General [Sylwester Stankiewicz \(1866–1919\)](#) as a commander of the Polish II Corps. General Stankiewicz, a Russified Pole, accepted his new rank reluctantly.

On 9 February 1918, in Brest-Litovsk, the Central Powers accepted the annexation of the Chelm Provinces by the Ukrainian People's Republic. This caused protests by Poles in Austrian [Poland](#) and led to the military coup in the II Brigade of the Polish Legions commanded by [Józef Haller \(1873–1960\)](#). The Polish legionaries refused to continue to serve the [Austro-Hungarian state](#). They broke through the eastern front line near the village of Rarańcza on 18 February 1918. Their main aim was to join the Polish army in Ukraine. Haller contacted the delegate of the Polish Chief Military Committee in Russia and the Regency Council in Warsaw. He joined the Polish II Corps on 6 March

1918 and officially became its commander.

In March 1918, after signing peace treaties with Ukraine, Bolshevik Russia, and [Romania](#), the Central Powers began disarming all Polish forces on Ukrainian and Romanian territory.

Consequently, the Poles had to evacuate eastwards to avoid contact with the Central Powers. Their goal was then to fight the German invasion and win Polish independence. On 28 March the Polish II Corps marched to Kaniów and entered the territory under German occupation. Haller did not want to get involved in the [Russian civil war](#); rather, he aimed to join General Dowbór-Muśnicki. In April 1918, the Chief Council of the Polish II Corps decided not to attach to the I Corps because of Dowbór-Muśnicki's negotiations with the Germans.

There was confusion about the future of the II Corps. The Polish landowners in the Uman area tried to use the II Corps to protect their properties. General [Aleksander Osiński \(1870–1956\)](#) ordered Haller to stop the corps in Kaniów. Haller had to obey the orders of Polish Military Command in Kiev, and at the same time he could not negotiate with Germans without approval of Regency Council. The council waited and ignored Haller's requests for protection. On 12 May 1918 the II Corps, consisting of 7,000 Polish soldiers, was surrounded and attacked by 12,000 Germans; after a short fight, the Germans were victorious. Some II Corps soldiers were interned by the Germans, but most escaped. The largest group marched to Siberia, where they joined the so-called 5th Riflemen Division. This group, was formed on 1 July 1918 in Omsk, and consisted of Poles - former Russian soldiers and Polish prisoners of war who fought as soldiers for the Central Powers. Haller escaped and managed to reach Murmansk, which was occupied by the Entente forces. Boarding a French ship, Haller eventually reached France. In the summer of 1918 he became commander of the Polish army, which fought with the Germans as the "Blue Army" (*Błękitna armia*).

The remaining Polish unit in Russia was the Polish III Corps, 2,250 soldiers strong and under the command of General de Henning-Michaelis. De Henning-Michaelis, who lost his leadership role in the Polish forces in Ukraine because of his conflict with General Osiński, began talks with Austrians on his own. On 2 August 1918, as a result of pressure from the Austro-Hungarian authorities, the Polish III Corps was disarmed and demobilized.

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