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**'IN A MERE SHIRT AND CAPLESS':
THE UNIFORM CRISIS OF THE POLISH ARMY DURING
THE POLISH-UKRAINIAN-BOLSHEVIK WAR 1918-21**

Abstract

This article presents issues relating to the uniforms of the Polish Army during the wars of 1918–21 in the context of the severe economic and epidemic crisis plaguing both the country and the region. Drawing on the accounts of participants and eyewitnesses of the war, and also by making recourse to the largely unpublished documents of the Sanitary Headquarters of the Polish Army Command-in-Chief, I look at the causes, scale and effects of the severe shortage of uniforms and equipment – shortages that would beset and plague Polish soldiers. The second part of the article presents institutional, top-down attempts to improve the situation involving substantial foreign procurements. Asking whether the crisis was ever truly resolved, the findings here offer ultimately a negative assessment of what ultimately transpired. The article's final section indicates the relationship between the catastrophic situation regarding supplies and the threats posed by the Spanish flu and typhus.

Keywords: Army, Polish-Bolshevik War 1919–21, uniforms, typhus, Spanish flu

I
THE FIRST PARADE

Even though the previous day had been overcast, on Saturday, 3 May 1919, there was not a cloud in the sky. Tens of thousands of people had gathered in a field near the Warsaw citadel to participate in the first official celebrations of what was now a national holiday. The highlight of the day was to be a parade. However, judging from the description recorded by the first US ambassador to the independent Republic of Poland, Hugh S. Gibson, the show was stolen by its commander-

-in-chief Józef Piłsudski, in terms of the rapturous reception afforded him by the gathered crowd.¹

The parade was fronted by a thousand soldiers from Haller's army. These Western Front veterans in blue uniforms looked very distinguished – according to the French envoy sitting on the stand, they looked like real *poilus*.² The uhlans made an equally strong impression; but the entirety of what was the Polish naval fleet, consisting of three motorboats on Pripjat in Pinsk, a 200-strong unit of sailors in the uniforms of the defunct Imperial and Royal Navy, were met with incredulous amusement by the foreign representatives who were present. From that moment onwards, events began to unravel.

The parade lasted for several hours, with the troops dressed in whatever they had been able to cobble together, which ultimately involved them parading in assortments of Russian, German and Austrian uniforms. The weapons exhibited were of equally dubious provenance. Even worse, some soldiers could be seen wearing either homemade uniforms or indeed civilian clothing.³ Gibson's assessment was measured: on the one hand, he appreciated the care with which the volunteers had treated their improvised uniforms, whereas, on the other, he pointed to their lack of kit. The shortcomings of the parade can be interpreted as the romantic attributes of a republican army or even a civic militia, emerging from the ruins of empires, not the first and not the last moving scene in the history of Polish military and emancipation movements – to think of the Bar Confederates,

¹ Vivian Hux Reed, M.B.B. Biskupski, Jochen Böhrer, and Jan-Roman Potocki (eds), *An American in Warsaw. Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland 1919–1924* (Rochester–Woodbridge, 2018), 58–61.

² *Poilus* – literally 'overgrown', was a colloquial term for French soldiers during the First World War. Contrary to popular belief, it had nothing to do with stubble. On the contrary, the introduction of gas masks forced the French soldiers to shave rigorously. In fact, the history of the word goes back to the first decades of the nineteenth century, and actually refers to hair as a symbol of masculinity, only that in the area of the genitals, see Albert Dauzat, *L'argot de la guerre d'après une enquête auprès des officiers et soldats* (Paris, 1918), 48–50.

³ The army with which Józef Piłsudski started out in the previous war looked no different. An officer visiting the first cadre companies of the Legions in August 1914 in Kielce recalled their deplorable and motley appearance – a mixture of Rifle-men's Association uniforms, Austrian, Russian, railway uniforms, civilian clothing and even highland folk costumes. August Krasicki, *Dziennik z kampanii rosyjskiej* (Warszawa, 1988), 55.

the Kosciuszko's 'scythemen' [*kosynierzy*] and the Warsaw insurgents. They were undoubtedly emblematic of the problem to which this article is devoted – the supply and provisions crisis that beset the Polish army during this crucial period.

II BASIC SHORTCOMINGS

The Polish-Ukrainian-Russian war would take place in the context of a civilisational, sanitary and moral collapse. The conditions of service in the ranks of the Polish Army were so terrible that Piłsudski chose to delay the introduction of conscription. In his own words, impoverished circumstances were easier for idealistic volunteers to endure than for forcibly conscripted recruits. To make matters worse, the latter group, who were sceptical to the idea of Polish statehood in the first place, became reinforced in their views by the general conditions which they found to exist in the army.⁴ And yet, the threat of the Ukrainian invasion of Lesser Poland meant that a general call-up was announced on Christmas Day, 1918. Soon the combined forces of the former Congress Poland and Galicia swelled to 110,000 men, with more joining each day. In spring and summer, after the arrival of two more armies, 'Wielkopolska' and Haller's – each one totalling 70,000 soldiers, the ranks of the state army exceeded half a million. This figure would increase to a million a year later during the decisive struggle with the Red Army.⁵

The fallen empires left stockpiles of weapons following the collapse; where there had been a significant imbalance between the numbers of weapons in storehouses behind the lines, only 17 per cent of soldiers ever carried a gun at one time.⁶ On the other hand, this ratio was almost favourable compared to the dire situation of piles of dishevelled wearables available in the Polish Army

⁴ Jochen Böhrer, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918-1921. The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018), 53.

⁵ Lech Wyszczelski, 'Powstanie i rozwój Wojska Polskiego w latach 1918-1921', *Słupskie Studia Historyczne*, xiii (2007), 21-38 (pp. 22-4, 35).

⁶ The 'scythemen' troops, created in the summer of 1920, were an expression of longing for the form and symbol of the moment rather than a tactical necessity, *ibid.*, 36.

storehouses or those confiscated or reclaimed from the oppressors.⁷ According to estimates, the army commissariat had uniforms for 100,000 and boots for 70,000.⁸ The shortage of trousers and overcoats would soon come to light, but jackets and boots ran out just as quickly. As a result, most of the soldiers first served in civilian garbs and then went about half-undressed when their clothes and boots disintegrated.

In the first year of the war, complaints about severe uniform shortages were a permanent feature of post-inspection reports. I will mention a few of them so that we may better understand the scale of the problem. In February in Volhynia, soldiers under General Edward Śmigły-Rydz wore two pairs of long underwear instead of trousers;⁹ new recruits served in their own civilian clothes. In the spring of 1919, the Sanitary Inspector of the Eastern Front estimated that of the five thousand ‘ragged and barefoot’ soldiers of Rydz, more than half did not have any coats, uniforms or boots, so not only were they unable to go the front, they could not exercise or do guard duty either.¹⁰ At the same time, none of the 370 battalion members of the Białystok Infantry Regiment had either a coat or a shirt, but all of them had boots, unlike the uhlan troops quartered in the neighbourhood. The latter were forced to walk in ‘footrests’, an extravagant combination of straw slip-ons tied to what was left of worn-out jackboots, that is, the leather

⁷ The Polish Armed Forces [*Polnische Wehrmacht*] was the army of the Kingdom of Poland – a puppet Polish state created in the areas of the Russian partition on the initiative of the German Empire. In 1918, the Polish Armed Forces numbered less than 10,000.

⁸ Bolek Rosiński, ‘Doughboy w Wojsku Polskim 1918–1921’, *Szabla i Koń*, ii, 5 (2012), 35; Aleksander Smoliński, ‘Początkowe dzieje barwy i symboliki strzelców podhalańskich oraz ich związki z kulturą ludową Podhala – lata 1918–1920: przyczynek do badań mundurologicznych i kostiumologicznych’, *Czasy Nowożytne*, xiv (2003), 103–76 (p. 126); Jerzy Konrad Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka. Dzienniki frontowe 1914–1920* (Warszawa, 2015), 123.

⁹ In the original: “chodzą w dwóch [*sic!*] parach gaci [they walk about in two pairs of underwear]”, Warszawa, Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego (hereinafter: CAW WBH), Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, ii, Sprawozdanie z inspekcji sanitarnej garnizonów grupy gen. ppor. Śmigłego-Rydza w Chełmie, Kowlu i Włodzimierzu Woł.

¹⁰ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, v, Z inspekcji sanitarnej garnizonu i miasta Białej, oraz frontu i etapów grupy generała Rydza-Śmigłego.

upper and the vamp.¹¹ The members of the Białystok crew also walked about in makeshift footwear.¹² The shortage of footwear affected not only privates and non-commissioned officers but also representatives of the army elite. Indeed, the chief of the sanitary division complained to the front-line inspector in a telegram that one of the long-awaited doctors could not be on duty as he had arrived at the unit barefoot.¹³

Polish soldiers, advancing eastwards in the first months of the war, not only looked like a bunch of rag-tag partisans, their discipline and morale were equitable with the same. Since the quartermaster had not provided them with adequate food and care, they had to fend for themselves. Misery, squalor, hunger and cold forced Polish soldiers to take actions that completely contradicted the kind of idealised image that had been preserved in collective memory. Władysław Broniewski, and above all Jerzy Konrad 'Zawadiaka' Maciejewski, whose memoirs cannot be dispensed with by any self-respecting publication concerning the events of that period, gave many examples of abuse and crimes,¹⁴ I will pay attention to those directly related to the issue of uniforms.

The order of the day was the "frequent murdering of prisoners and the customary stripping them of everything that the temporal victor so wished". Although the vast majority of the captured Bolsheviks managed to save their lives, they did not, however, preserve the usable garments, and after the forced exchange, the prisoners were left with "frayed rags".¹⁵ During the Kiev offensive in the spring of 1920, such practices were sanctioned – as most of the Russian prisoners of war, apart from officers, specialists and ideological communists, were to be set free, in order to prevent their immediate return to the enemy ranks, apart from the confiscation of their weapons, their boots and coats were also taken. This pilferage continued within the full sanction of the law, with the difference that, under the order, it had to be preceded

¹¹ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. CAW, I.301.17, ii, Do Naczelnego Dowództwa przez Kwatermistrzostwo Główn. Raport.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, iv, Depesze juzowe.

¹⁴ Władysław Broniewski, *Pamiętnik 1918–1922* (Warszawa, 1984), 73, 156–7; Jerzy Konrad Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka. Dzienniki frontowe 1914–1920* (Warszawa, 2015), 122, 152–3, 172, 197–9, 214, 222–3, 285.

¹⁵ Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka*, 259.

by a verbal explanation of why it was necessary.¹⁶ The inhabitants of the Ruthenian hamlets and Jewish shtetls were just as ruthlessly plundered during ‘punitive expeditions’ undertaken against villages suspected of supporting the enemy. Murder following pillaging, and those shot, stabbed, or beaten to death with rifle butts were stripped off their white sheepskins, boots and underwear.¹⁷

The desperation for decent uniforms pushed soldiers to rob from and desecrate their fallen comrades-in-arms. Maciejewski recalled how after the battle, the Galicians, dressed in ‘various old rags’ of Austrian origin, stripped the fallen ‘Wielkopolanie’ regiment of their German garments (which had been objects of envy); and how fiercely the Galicians washed off the blood stains at the well before putting them on.¹⁸

From today’s perspective of over a hundred years, the issue of insufficient military consignments may escape attention, especially when compared with the other problems that the nascent country was having to face, such as border threats or the insecure internal situation; but its consequences were severe and multi-layered. Firstly, it weakened the military and numerical potential of the army and threatened its physical existence. Secondly, it undermined the morale of the soldiers, compromising the Polish state-formation project in their eyes, and finally, it led to utter demoralisation by pushing the soldiers to engage in looting and murder. As a result, crimes committed against the Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish populations aroused a hatred towards the institutions of the Polish state and Polishness in general; and almost fatally undermined the Polish project.

Although many were aware of this, and even, as the memoirists above, directly described the mentioned effects, it is not known to what extent they were taken into consideration by the military’s higher echelons. Indeed, what prompted them to act were primarily the sanitary and health imperatives, and perhaps also the declining

¹⁶ “According to the instructions, it was necessary to start educating the prisoners by explaining the following issues to them: 1. Why is Poland releasing prisoners of war? 2. Why are their coats and shoes removed? 3. What does Poland want? 4. Who is to blame for the ongoing war? 5. What will be the fate of Russia in the event of the war?”. Zbigniew Karpus, *Jeńcy i internowani rosyjscy na terenie Polski w latach 1918–1924* (Toruń, 1999), 58.

¹⁷ Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka*, 173–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

morale, and not the broader political and national ramifications. Either way, a semblance of an attempt was made to resolve the crisis.

III PROCUREMENTS FROM ABROAD

In the beginning, after distributing the assortments of Austrian and German origin, there was simply no place to find any more. The domestic textile industry, ravaged by the war and paralysed by the shortage of raw materials, could not meet the demand. Although recyclable materials – old clothes, fabrics and material of all kinds – were collected (like those woven from nettle with an admixture of paper, the cotton ersatz commonly used in the German army), the uniforms made from them fell apart after a few weeks in the field.¹⁹

Only foreign purchases could ameliorate the situation, but due to the neutrality or hostility of the south-western neighbours, it was impossible to secure any delivery.²⁰ Initially, using the contacts of former soldiers and Galician politicians, Polish Army quartermasters turned to Vienna, where they managed to purchase 10,000 uniforms and the same number of boots for both cash and on credit. In March 1919, when the front-line soldiers were already walking around in rags, a transit channel through Austria and Czechoslovakia was opened, thanks to the support of France. On this occasion, the goods were to be delivered by Uncle Sam.

An English gentleman in the late eighteenth century reportedly owned 600 shirts. 200 in a closet for everyday use, 200 dirty ones on a ship to Amsterdam, where the best laundresses in Europe were to be found, and 200 clean ones being shipped back to the British Isles. It seems that this system inspired the quartermasters of the American Expeditionary Force. The AEF soldier fighting on the Western Front had access to luxuries unheard of at that time in the armies of Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, i.e. the regular replacement of the entire uniform every three months (underwear and socks every month). The rule was that a 90-day uniform reserve for the entire army had to be on standby behind the front lines. At the same time, the same stock level was stored in US East Coast ports, and the third change

¹⁹ Smoliński, 'Początkowe dzieje', 126; Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka*, 144.

²⁰ Rosiński, 'Doughboy', 35.

of clothing (except for the kit the soldiers wore) came from across the ocean. In the first year of participation in the war alone, the AEF provided its people with an unimaginable 242 million long johns, T-shirts, shirts, breeches, uniform jackets and coats, and after the ceasefire, France was flooded with the allied military surplus.²¹ Even a fraction of it could have been a salvation for Polish soldiers.

The first transport reached the country in May 1919, shortly after the motley parade described in the introduction. The number of uniforms delivered immediately exceeded the supplies inherited from the annexationists. At the same time, 'Poznanians' and 'Hallerans', kitted out according to Western standards, appeared on the eastern front. In June, the sanitary officers of the Poleski Front reported that they had received a sufficient number of uniforms, boots and underwear,²² and a new entry appeared in the warehouse records of one of the bath-disinfection trains (more on them below) – "American underwear".²³ It seemed that the situation was starting to change for the better, not only because of the most obvious factor, the arrival of spring. However, was that actually the case?

If there was a real improvement from some supply lines, it was only temporary. In early autumn, the health chief of the 1st Legions Infantry Division, a unit considered to be a continuation of the 1st Legions Brigade, and for this reason enjoying, as we may surmise, special considerations from the command, reported that their uniforms were in a tattered state.²⁴ His counterpart in the 6th Infantry Division alarmed that the level of uniform provisions had deteriorated so much during the six months of the division's operation. Despite the beginning of winter, the soldiers had not received either coats or jackets, instead of uniforms they were wearing rags black from dirt, and their toes were sticking out from their torn boots.²⁵ At the turn of September and October, as a result of conclusions formulated in a report prepared by the Command-in-Chief – "the situation with

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35–6.

²² CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, xviii, Raport sanitarny za miesiąc czerwiec 1919 frontu Poleskiego.

²³ *Ibid.*, Raport dwumiesięczny pociągu dezynfekcyjno-kąpielowego nr 2 (title illegible).

²⁴ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, xlii, Sprawozdanie.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, lii, Meldunek miesięczny za listopad.

uniforms and equipment is beyond alarming” – the Economic Department of the Ministry of Military Affairs handed over to the army all the uniforms it had in its possession.²⁶ A month later, the sanitary chief of the Lithuanian-Belarusian Front, which included both of the divisions mentioned above, assured that the consignment situation had improved significantly. More details were provided by the Deputy Chief of Staff of the 7th Infantry Division, who at that time was not on the Eastern Front, but stationed in the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia. In fact, the soldiers had received a large consignment: several thousand pairs of trousers, sweatshirts, coats and boots, the same number of underwear items, but the delivery did not cover the full demand. Some of the uniforms were of poor paper-thin-like quality, and with wear and tear coupled with the inability to repair them, they soon became unusable. The soldiers were so ragged that they aroused “a very negative opinion among the civilian population” and served as “the basis of agitation on the part of the Czechs”.²⁷ The final announcement of the Chief of Command included an assurance that all efforts were being made to ensure the combat value of the unit; whilst also stating that the ‘rag-tag’ state of uniforms was unsuitable for undertaking operational activities.²⁸ Today this all seems contradictory in the extreme.

The authorities did what they could to properly clothe and shod the soldiers to offer them rudimentary protection, both in the field and in the barracks, against the cold and the wet. Any assessment of their effectiveness is difficult, however, as all related information is buried in various types of sources: the statistical reports, the strategy of the army authorities, reports and documents produced at various levels of command, as well as the experiences of individual soldiers and civilians. The members of each of these groups were guided by different priorities, affecting the content of their account – the staff officers were probably more willing to see the positive effect of the actions taken than the division commanders. In contrast, the latter, in order to secure as many consignments as possible from the central warehouses, could be prone to present the situation in the most negative light possible. For the front-line writers, what mattered was

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xlv, Stan organizacji 7 Dywizji Piechoty.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, iii, Raport miesięczny sanitarny za miesiąc listopad.

the effect, both in their presentation of heroism and suffering, from which the excess of hyperbole stemmed. Their political views could have distorted everyone's judgment: for example, their attitude to the war waged against the Ukrainians and Russians. The question, despite partially contradictory reports and testimonies, still remains valid: Was the crisis resolved?

IV A BITTER JUDGEMENT

The Polish military historian Andrzej Smoliński, a specialist on the uniforms of the Polish Army in the interwar period, states directly that nothing was resolved. Despite the efforts, the uniform situation deteriorated throughout 1919, and the same took place in the following year.²⁹ Simple math will help us verify this judgment – according to the ministry's calculations, at the very beginning of 1920, the army, together with the planned draft, needed an additional 1,200,000 sets of uniforms.³⁰ From May 1919 to the end of 1920, about half a million uniforms were purchased from the Americans.³¹ Even if we add French and Greater Poland assortments, domestic production, processed civilian clothing, or war spoils to this number, given the swelling ranks of soldiers, there were still not enough uniforms, despite the large procurements. The shortages were intensified by the wear and tear of the kits, arising from their poor quality, the harsh conditions of service, and their mishandling by soldiers.³² Moreover, consignments stored in warehouses had to be distributed and delivered, which was quite a challenge due to the inefficiency of rail transport. In mid-October 1919, at Kowelski Railway Station in Warsaw, there were 139 unloaded supply wagons, 44 of them were filled with uniforms. Logistical problems led to a situation where some troops were still walking around barefoot and ragged, while others, higher up the supply chain, were stocking up. Some of the deliveries disappeared into thin

²⁹ Smoliński, *Początkowe dzieje*, 126–8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Rosiński, 'Doughboy', 36.

³² "For example, soldiers were drying wet shoes too close to an open fire. The leather dried up and cracked, one time was enough for the boots to open their 'menacing jaws'". Broniewski, *Pamiętnik*, 66.

air, sold to belt makers; or stolen. It is not known to what extent Major Bolesław Korolewicz, the sanitary chief of one of the tactical groups, and soon of the front, was joking when he asked his superior, the sanitary chief of the Command-in-Chief, Colonel Wojciech Rogalski, to send him undressed people, as he would be able to obtain uniforms by way of his own devices, and with the help of God and 'his Lwów thieves'.³³ The fact that such jokes were allowed by senior officers in official correspondence proves both the commonality of the problem and the indifference to any unregulated ways of dealing with the same.

Meanwhile, the events of 1920 – both the rapid advancement and the equally quick but more chaotic retreat of the Polish army, as well as the continuous influx of conscripts and volunteers – did not contribute to the improvement of the situation in any way. As a result, Polish soldiers, as in the previous year, beat Ukrainians in Volhynia and Bolsheviks in Lithuania, and defended Warsaw – barefoot and in tattered uniforms, 'ragged' and hanging off their bare bodies which were without underclothing. As one of the peasant recruits³⁴ lamented, they were farting into thin air. Even the ceasefire did not bring them relief, on the contrary, it foreshadowed the advent of new troubles. Demobilised and rested soldiers were to hand over 'treasury' assortments and underwear, in line with the regulations and under the threat of losing their pay. This threatened not only their health – the fighting stopped in mid-autumn and the journey home took many days – but also the reputation of the state, whose defenders appeared in their native villages, emaciated, frozen to the bone, and in rags. The alternative option was to decommission them in uniform, and even to equip them for the road with the best-looking, least worn items. The consequence of this – as there would not be a sufficient amount of clothes for everybody – was the divestment of the soldiers remaining in service. This was done in the summer of 1921 by the socially sensitive Broniewski, who at least attempted to address the rebellious concerns of his company.³⁵ In Maciejewski's regiment, however, the divestment was ruthlessly applied; and it took place in the middle of winter.³⁶

³³ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, iv, Rozmowa juzowa.

³⁴ Böhler, *Civil War*, 187–9.

³⁵ Broniewski, *Pamiętnik*, 250.

³⁶ Maciejewski, *Zawadiaka*, 356.

V
HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Apart from Sich riflemen and Budyonny's cavalrymen, the health and life of Polish soldiers could be furthered by even more dangerous, though tiny enemies, the deadly trinity – syphilis pale spirochetes, flu viruses, and typhus bacteria spread by lice. While the lack of clothing and underwear played an equally important role in the spread of STDs, I will focus on the last two diseases and the link between their causes and the military clothing crisis.

In the fall of 1918, the world was ravaged by the greatest natural catastrophe in human history: the Spanish flu pandemic. This pandemic had been triggered and intensified by the circumstances surrounding the final months of the First World War.³⁷ In Poland alone, 130,000 people may have died in 1918.³⁸ And although it seems that the spring wave in 1919 was not so intense, the flu was still a serious threat, especially for those who had to perform their field service in unfavourable winter conditions and in the transitional seasons in incomplete or insufficiently warm clothing. Indeed, they did not need one of the most aggressive mutations of the virus in history to endanger them: rain, wind and frost were sufficient threats to their health.

Lacking coats and boots, soldiers caught colds *en masse*. In March 1919, the inspector of the Eastern Front (that is, Lithuanian-Belarusian front), Major General Aleksander Bernatowicz, informed the Command-in-Chief about it: “Due to the lack of clothing, many patients with colds and respiratory diseases can be seen”.³⁹ What did he mean by ‘many’? In one of the companies of the 32nd infantry regiment consisting of 120 soldiers, 40 reported sick in one day, mostly with a sore throat and cough.⁴⁰ It should be noted that this unit was stationed ‘very

³⁷ Due to its second autumn wave, the 30 days between mid-October and November 1918 was probably the deadliest month in history, and up to a million people a day may have died from the flu all over the world. Between 1918 and 1920, the death toll reached 100 million. Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider. The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (London, 2017), 4.

³⁸ Łukasz Mieszkowski, ‘A Foreign Lady: The Polish Episode of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918’, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 113 (2016), 221.

³⁹ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, ii, Do Naczelnego Dowództwa Wojska Polskiego przez Kwaternmistrzostwo Głównę.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

conveniently' in the centre of Białystok. A month later, visiting the already known group of General Śmigły-Rydz, Bernatowicz laconically noted: "A ragged, barefoot soldier – which contributes to cold-related diseases and a general decline of the spirit".⁴¹ A year later, he himself fell victim to the crisis which he had tried so hard to combat – in March 1920, he succumbed to the flu.⁴²

One might think that with the advent of summer, the situation improved, even for obvious atmospheric reasons, and in fact, one of the inspection reports of an envoy from the Sanitary Department of the Ministry of Military Affairs notes the optimism of the 'newly picked' recruits, with their bare heels stomping the beats of the march, 'the ground rumbles',⁴³ as if in passing, revealing another episode of soldiers' misery and squalor. Unfortunately, another document – this time a telegram – dispelled these hopes. Although it was sent on 13 August, it reported that in General Lasocki's division, due to a shortage of at least 2,000 coats, "lung diseases are of terrifying proportions".⁴⁴ In winter, frostbite was added to the list of ailments,⁴⁵ and there were also cases of soldiers freezing to death,⁴⁶ especially when the tragic consequences of the shortage of supplies were also accompanied by the thoughtlessness and cruelty of non-commissioned officers. Parliamentarians made appeals on behalf of the brutally treated recruits, kept for hours in the bitter frost, sometimes flat on their backs in the snow, or in unheated, windowless barracks.⁴⁷ And even if the numbers they give seem at times exaggerated – in Suwałki and Augustów in January 1920, 60 young soldiers (corrected with a pen

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, v, Raport z inspekcji generalnej garnizonu i miasta Białej, oraz frontów i etapów sfery grupy generała Rydza-Śmigłego.

⁴² Józef Piłsudski Institute of America, sygn. 701/2/8, 287-289, Raport tygodniowy za czas od 7-go do 13-go marca 1920 roku Szefostwa Sanitarnego Naczelnego Dowództwa.

⁴³ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, xxiv, Do Naczelnego Dowództwa W.P.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xxviii, Dzienny raport sytuacyjny materalny z dnia 13 sierpnia.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, cviii, Komunikat sytuacji sanitarnej nr 64 z dnia 1 listopada 1920 roku.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Komunikat sytuacji sanitarnej nr 65 z dnia 2 listopada 1920 roku.

⁴⁷ Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN), Prezydium Rady Ministrów, sygn. 10065/20, T13/1067/01, Interpelacja p. J. Piotrowskiego i tow. Z klubu N.Z.L. w sprawie niewłaściwego wykonania zarządzeń higienicznych [higienicznych] przez władze wojskowe względem pobranych rekrutów z pow. Łęczyckiego.

from 100 typed on the typewriter) were said to have died from the cold,⁴⁸ such situations certainly did occur.

Despite the obvious reasons presented above, the Spanish flu (including diseases of the upper airways) did not leave a visible imprint in the sources known. According to the official post-war statistics of the Ministry of Military Affairs, between 1919 and 1920, nearly 35,000 soldiers of the Polish Army, – or about 3 per cent – fell ill with the flu and less than 0.03 per cent of all men serving in the army died.⁴⁹ In the light of the overall picture of the contagion, these figures seem to be understated – during the fall-spring wave of the disease from 1918 to 1919 alone, 14 to 20 per cent of the entire Polish population contracted the strain.⁵⁰

It can, of course, be assumed that the Spanish flu and Polish soldiers simply missed each other. When its record wave took its death toll in the fall of 1918, the army was just beginning to form, young men were dying as civilians, and in the following years, the pandemic – in line with its dynamics – began to ease. It was still present in the records of the military sanitary services, but rather endemically, more as a permanent feature of the epidemic landscape than a violent, catastrophic anomaly. However, it is more likely that, due to the inability to fight it effectively, both in the field of medicine and food provisions, military doctors glossed over it, especially since they had the ability to manipulate the statistics so that they could confirm the effectiveness of their actions and met the expectations of the command. The soldiers continued to catch colds and coughed, and some died, but that was simply the sad fate of the men who had been called up for to the army.

If the deficiencies in the top layer clothing resulted in colds and Spanish flu, then the bottom layer led to an outbreak of typhus. Typhus, not to be confused with typhoid fever, is an infectious bacterial disease. Apart from rash and petechiae, its symptoms are similar

⁴⁸ AAN, Prezydium Rady Ministrów, sygn. 7311/20, 3, AS.Kol.-T13/1079/01, Interpelacja posła ks. Szczęsnowicza i tow. Do Ministra Spraw Wojskowych w sprawie karygodnego niedbalstwa czynników wojskowych względem rekrutów Ziemi Suwalskiej wskutek czego około 60 tych młodych ludzi utraciło życie.

⁴⁹ Czesław Jeśman, *Choroby zakaźne w wojsku polskim w latach 1918–1939 jako zagadnienie epidemiologiczne i profilaktyczno-lecznicze*, part 1: *Sytuacja epidemiologiczna w Wojsku Polskim na tle całego kraju w latach 1918–1921* (Łódź, 1997), 74–5.

⁵⁰ Mieszkowski, 'A Foreign Lady', 221.

to flu – fever, headaches, muscle and joint pain, heart and nervous system ailments. It had been endemic on the Central European border for centuries; in 1915, during the retreat of the Russian army from the eastern governorates of the empire and the refugee crisis, two continents – Europe and Asia – were hit with the largest typhus outbreak in history.⁵¹ In Poland, in the first half of 1919 alone, over 320,000 cases were officially registered, nearly 20,000 of those infected died⁵² – other sources suggest that in 1918 these numbers amounted to 673,000 and 141,500, respectively!⁵³

What distinguished typhus from influenza was the higher mortality rate and how it spread. It was not until 1914 that a branch of the Pasteur Institute in Algiers discovered that it was spread by lice; specifically their droppings, rubbed into the wounds formed by scratching carriers.⁵⁴ From that moment onwards, the prevention of typhus became, apart from the experimental vaccinations that were still ineffective,⁵⁵ a fight against head lice – involving the washing and disinfecting of clothes as often as possible, the cutting of hair and body washing, especially among those portions of the population where, due to the terrible sanitary conditions in which they lived, it was a natural reservoir and a hatchery of lice and typhus – made worse by the constantly moving refugees, villagers, prisoners and soldiers. But it was soldiers who faced the greatest danger – if we are to believe the desperately inaccurate statistics, the incidence in the Polish Army was nine times higher, and the mortality rate was seven times higher than among the civilian population.⁵⁶ Therefore, unlike the flu, fighting typhus was a priority for the military medical units.

The Polish model of anti-typhus protection of the army, modelled on the German one, which had proved its effectiveness during the First World War, was based on two pillars: a sanitary cordon, i.e. lines drawn at the back of the front, which could be crossed in certain places after

⁵¹ Arthur Allen, *The Fantastic Laboratory of Dr. Weigel. How Two Brave Scientists Battled Typhus and Sabotaged the Nazis* (New York–London, 2014), 31–5.

⁵² CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, xx, Zwalczanie tyfusu plamistego i masowe oczyszczanie ludności.

⁵³ Allen, *The Fantastic Laboratory*, 38.

⁵⁴ Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe 1890–1945* (Oxford–New York, 2000), 14–15.

⁵⁵ Jeśman, *Choroby zakaźne*, 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

health checks and delousing, and active anti-epidemic action carried out by stationary baths, mobile sanitary columns and disinfection and bathing trains.⁵⁷ Many factors threatened the effectiveness of these actions – the lack of underwear already mentioned in the text was one of the basic ones.

The authors of the complaints and reports emphasised not so much the state of wear and tear of clothing – as in the case of outerwear – but the degree of dirtiness. “A shirt on a soldier is black with filth – like some kind of rag – never washed, it serves as an excellent environment for parasites and all kinds of miasmas”⁵⁸ – this quote reflects the common overtone of complaints and reports, another, more blunt term was to describe the underwear as ‘rotten’.⁵⁹

Again, despite periodic improvements in supply, the problem of cleanliness seemed unsolvable. By the instructions, each soldier had the right and obligation to bathe every 10-14 days, after which they were to receive a clean change of underwear.⁶⁰ One does not have to be a hygienist to imagine what underwear looked like most of the time, even when the regulations were meticulously followed, and then other problems thwarted the effectiveness of the entire action. In early June 1920, high-ranking Polish officials and a French officer carried out a short inspection of one of the army disinfection and bathing trains in western Ukraine, which revealed how the anti-epidemic measures looked like in practice given permanent supply shortages.⁶¹ Apart from other shortcomings, there was no soap. The underwear that the soldiers handed over before their cold bath, was disinfected, but not

⁵⁷ On Polish disinfection-bathing trains see Łukasz Mieszkowski, ‘Trains of Disinfection. Fighting Lice on Polish Railroads 1919–1921’, in Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, Joachim von Puttkamer, and Immo Rebitschek (eds), *Fearing for the Nation: Biopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century* (Abingdon-on-Thames, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, lii, Meldunek miesięczny za listopad do Dowództwa Frontu Lit.-Biał. Szef Sanitarny w Wilnie.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, Naczelne Dowództwo – Główne Kwatermistrzostwo Szef Sanitarny.

⁶⁰ Jeśman, *Choroby zakaźne*, 60.

⁶¹ CAW WBH, Szefostwo Sanitarne Naczelnego Dowództwa WP, sygn. I.301.17, cxliii, Raport kpt. D-ra J. Przedborskiego z podróży inspekcyjnej na terenie D.O.W. Płoskirów odbytej łącznie z zastępcą Nacz. Nad. Kom. do spraw walki z epid. i ofic. łącznikowym misji wojsk. francuskiej mjr. D-r Roudouly, 2–3.

washed. They had to put the underwear back on, and the underwear was so dirty that the condition was recorded in the report.

The related spread of typhus, the fight against head lice, and problems with the supply of underwear appear in most of the documents of the Sanitary Directorate of the Polish Army Command-in-Chief, which is the backbone source for this research. Yet again, as in the case of influenza, official statistics do not confirm the scale of the problem – according to which, between the years 1918 and 1922, 25,500 soldiers fell ill with typhus, and around 1,750 died.⁶² In view of the data for the entire country, these figures aimed to prove the effectiveness of the actions taken by the army High Command and not to reflect the true extent of the epidemic in the army. The true extent awaits a reliable estimate, whereas the link between the supply crisis and the epidemic crisis presented above is worth signalling.

VI A BITTER CONTRAST

In 1829, a plaster model of the planned monument to Prince Józef Poniatowski, sculpted by Bertel Thorwaldsen, was presented in a special shed located next to the Reduta Hall of the National Theatre on Krasiński Square in Warsaw. Contrary to expectations, the protagonist is not shown in a Polish uniform and a four-cornered uhlan cap, but with a bare head and an ancient tunic modelled on the statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. “In a mere shirt and capless”, the veterans of the Napoleonic Wars said tartly at the sight, declaring that such frivolous attire was not appropriate for the exalted glory of their leader.⁶³ This term, taken literally, can serve as an accurate commentary on the uniforms of the Polish Army in the first years of its existence and the war which the soldiers waged. An overwhelming, patriotic summation, suggesting that despite the problems with the appearance, both Prince Pepi and Polish soldiers heroically fulfilled their duty, will not be left without comment – thinking about the impact of the supply crisis on the military achievements of the Polish army, it should be remembered that Poland’s enemies were also struggling

⁶² Jeśman, *Choroby zakaźne*, 57.

⁶³ Szymon Kobyliński, *Szymona Kobylińskiego gawędy o broni i mundurze* (Warszawa, 1988), 58.

with the same problems; and were in most instances even worse off. What is important is the glaring contrast between the actual realities of the Polish-Ukrainian-Soviet war, and its false image preserved in the collective memory, cultivated over decades, and reinforced in recent years on the occasion of the centennial commemoration of the event.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Łukasz Mieszkowski, 'Swojskość i skaza', in Piotr Rypson (ed.), *Krzycząc: Polska! Niepodległa 1918* (Warszawa, 2018), 371–3.