

# Seed Corn of a Future Army: The Mobilisation of the Poles and the Creation of Polish Military Formations in the First World War

PAUL LATAWSKI

*Royal Military Academy Sandhurst*

*Email: [paul.latawski840@mod.uk](mailto:paul.latawski840@mod.uk)*

## ABSTRACT

*With the outbreak of the First World War, the warring camps wished to cultivate Polish loyalty and mobilise Polish manpower to their respective causes. Mobilisation included the mobilisation of rank and file reservists of Polish nationality as an ongoing wartime process and the creation of Polish military formations driven by wartime requirements for military manpower. The mobilisation of Poles and the creation of Polish military formations during the First World War supplied over 2,000,000 soldiers to three armies of the partitioning powers and with the cessation of hostilities had a significant role in the post-war reconstruction of the Polish Army.*

The outbreak of a general European war on 1 August 1914 triggered a major change in the geopolitical configuration of Central Europe that would lead to the rebirth of Poland. As a consequence of the alignment of the two warring camps, Britain/France/Russia versus Austria-Hungary/Germany, the nearly one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old solidarity of the partitioning powers, unshakeable throughout the nineteenth century, disintegrated as the Polish lands became an arena of confrontation in a European war. With the mutual interest over control of the Polish lands between Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire overturned by the outbreak of hostilities, each of the warring camps wished to cultivate Polish loyalty and mobilise Polish manpower for its respective cause. This geopolitical earthquake had both political and military consequences. The re-emergence of Poland in some shape or form cautiously re-entered political discussions in capitals of the warring powers. This revival of the 'Polish question' was, however, less about meeting future Polish aspirations than servicing wartime needs. Nevertheless, the mobilisation of the Polish population of Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire at the outbreak of the First World War had important military consequences in the longer term. It created the conditions that ultimately provided the means by which Poland, at its rebirth in November 1918, was

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

able to reconstruct its army. Mobilisation had two aspects. The first was the 'calling to colours' of Polish subjects in the states of the three partitioning powers. This related not only to mobilise rank and file reservists but provided a varied picture of the level of participation and integration of Poles in the armed forces of Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire. The second aspect was the creation of Polish military formations. This highlights the fact that mobilisation was not something that occurred only at the outbreak of conflict but rather should be seen as an ongoing process to meet the continuing and indeed growing wartime requirements for military manpower. The pressure for manpower was such that Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire (and France) accepted the creation of Polish military formations with varying degrees of autonomy as part of their military efforts. This essay will examine these two aspects of the mobilisation of Poles and consider how they provided the seed corn of a future Polish Army.

### **Poles in the Armies of Three Empires: mobilisation and integration**

The partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century had bequeathed to Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire territories with large Polish populations. Seen from the perspective of the territorial base of the partitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Imperial Russia controlled 78% of the territory with Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany gaining a little over 11% of the territory each. The Russian partition zone, however, contained territory where the Polish speaking population formed a relatively small percentage of the overall population in large areas of Belorussia and Ukraine. If territorial percentages are calculated using territory where the Polish population was dominant then the picture changed radically, albeit with Russia still possessing the largest share of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Imperial Russia controlled 44%, with Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany each possessing 28% of territory where the Polish population formed majorities.<sup>1</sup> The size of the Polish populations in the three partitioning powers determined the amount of manpower available for mobilisation. Based on 1911 statistics, Imperial Russia had a Polish population numbering 11,914,000 (46%), principally residing in the Congress Kingdom, while Austria-Hungary had 8,082,000 (31%) and Imperial Germany 6,055,000 (23%) out of the total Polish population of 26,051,000.<sup>2</sup>

Table I provides one estimate of the numbers of Poles mobilised or conscripted between 1914 and 1918 by Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian

---

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Polski w liczbach: ludność terytorium*, (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1994), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Empire.<sup>3</sup> The figures given are, however, somewhat high. The totals for each year of the war are based on research conducted in 1923 within the boundaries of post-war Poland. These figures contain individuals from Poland's national minorities who served in the armies of the partitioning powers in the First World War. Because of their inclusion the total number of Poles for the 1914-1918 period is inflated.<sup>4</sup> These figures indicate that in the course of four years of war the three partitioning powers would mobilise or conscript 3,376,780 inhabitants of the Polish lands. If this figure only consisted of Poles then it would represent nearly 13% of the 1911 Polish population.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Austria-Hungary</b>	<b>Imperial Germany</b>	<b>Russian Empire</b>
1914	702,288	426,953	844,648
1915	284,830	133,030	216,980
1916	169,315	99,139	92,720
1917	154,480	73,265	35,971
1918	90,594	47,121	5,446
Total 1914-18	1,401,507	779,508	1,195,765

**Table 1:** *Mobilisation & Conscription from the Polish lands 1914-18*

Despite having the largest segment of the Polish population, the Russian Empire was not able to mobilise the largest number of Poles. From 1916 to the end of the war the numbers of Poles mustered into Russian military service would sharply decline. The reasons for the Russian inability to harness Polish manpower fully were conditioned by a number of factors. The most significant reason was the expulsion of Russian forces from the Congress Kingdom. Offensive operations by the armies of the Central Powers dispossessed Russia of its most important source of Polish manpower by the end of September 1915. Although several hundred thousand Poles were evacuated during the retreat of 1915, the largest Russian reservoir of Polish manpower remained in the hands of the Central Powers effectively for the duration of the war.<sup>5</sup> Overall, in the period 1914-1917, the numbers of Poles serving in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Statistics for Table I taken from: Kazimierz Rosen-Zawadzki, 'Ziemie polskie i ościennicze działań wojennych 1914-1918', in: Żanna Kormanowa and Walentyna Najdus, *Historia Polski Tom II 1850/1864-1918 część 3 1914-1918*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1974), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

Russian Army numbered between 700,000 and 750,000.<sup>6</sup> The outbreak of revolution in Russia in spring 1917 accelerated the breakdown of the Russian war effort and the country's exit from the war. The mounting chaos and internal strife debilitated the Russian state's capacity to call into military service its manpower.

When Austria-Hungary mobilised in 1914 it conducted a formal military mobilisation that called to the colours reservists, but the Dual Monarchy also endeavoured to harness national sentiment of its many subject peoples. This 'semi-official national mobilisation' cultivated Polish support for the Austro-Hungarian war effort that built upon the de facto autonomy the Poles enjoyed in Galicia and tapped into fears driven by the proximity of a Russian military threat.<sup>7</sup> The figures given in Table 1 suggest that Austria-Hungary succeeded in mobilizing the largest numbers of Poles during the First World War. In fact, this was not the case. When the non-Polish national minorities who served in the Austro-Hungarian Army are subtracted from the figures given in Table 1, a more accurate picture emerges. In the territories in Austria-Hungary that contained substantial Polish populations (Galicia, Cieszyn Silesia and Bukovina) the total number of men of military age mobilised during the First World War amounted to 857,265. However, if the mobilised manpower from the Czech, Jewish and Ukrainian communities is subtracted then just under 720,000 Poles served in the Austro-Hungarian Army.<sup>8</sup> Although there were periods when parts of Galicia and Bukovina were under Russian occupation, Austria-Hungary did not lose access to its Polish manpower, as the eastern parts of Galicia were occupied for a relatively short period of time by the Russian Army and contained a large concentration of Ukrainians. Bukovina's Polish minority was very small, which made the impact of the Russian entry into the territory even less important to the issue of mobilised Polish manpower.<sup>9</sup> Although, contrary to the figures in Table 1, Austria-Hungary did not mobilise the largest number of Poles, its overall numbers were comparable to that of the Russian Empire.

Despite possessing the smallest percentage of the pre-war Polish population, Imperial Germany most likely mobilised the largest number of Poles between 1914 and 1918. Polish estimates vary from between just under 600,000 to 1 million. However, recent analysis by Alexander Watson suggests that a realistic calculation of the number of

---

<sup>6</sup> Tadeusz Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1914-1918', in: Piotr Stawecki (ed.), *I Wojna Światowa na ziemiach Polskich: materiały sympozjum poświęconego 70 rocznicy wybuchu wojny*, (Warszawa: Wojskowy Instytut Historyczny, 1986), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918*, (London: Allen Lane, 2014), pp. 94, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Marian Zgórniak, *Studia i rozprawy z dziejów XVI-XX wieku - historia militaria polityka*, (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2009), p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Poles who served in the German Army was about 850,000, a figure actually greater than that given in Table 1. This number represents about 6% of the total manpower mobilised by Germany.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the effectiveness of the machinery of the German state played its role in bringing Poles into military service. Nevertheless, bureaucratic efficiency is not sufficient as an explanation. The German success in mobilising such large numbers of Poles is impressive, not least as German oppression of Poles was the most systematic of any of the three partitioning powers as reflected in the state-directed *Kulturkampf* from the 1860s onward. Indeed, at the outbreak of war in the 'fortress city' of Posen (Poznań), not far from the German-Russian frontier, the German minority in the city generated a brief and illusory Polish insurrection scare.<sup>11</sup> Despite Imperial Germany mounting the most serious threat to the identity of the Polish population and Germany facing the most organised Polish resistance to Germanisation, getting Poles into German military service was not a problem. As the war proceeded, keeping them there proved a more significant challenge.<sup>12</sup>

### **Impact of initial mobilisation**

The impact of the initial mobilisations at the outbreak of the war had a disproportionate impact on Poles called to the colours in August 1914. The areas where the Polish population predominated were largely contiguous to each other across the partitioning powers' borders. At the centre was the salient formed by the Russian-controlled Congress Kingdom, surrounded on three sides by German and Austro-Hungarian territory with their own largely Polish populations. Geography thus ensured that the collision of armies at the outbreak of war would take place on territory inhabited by the Poles. Mobilisation of Polish reservists from the three warring powers immediately propelled them into the opening clashes on the eastern front.

At the onset of war, serving in the peacetime Russian Army were approximately 140,000 Poles or 9% of the total strength.<sup>13</sup> The mobilisation challenges that the Russian Empire's railway network faced in the time needed for deployment, the distances to be travelled and in the shortage of capacity in available rolling stock led to efforts to alleviate the transport burden. As a consequence, two-fifths of the peacetime Russian Army strength was deployed in the Congress Kingdom in close proximity to Russia's likely adversaries to reduce transportation requirements on the

---

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Watson, 'Fighting for Another Fatherland: The Polish Minority in the German Army, 1914-1918', *English Historical Review*, vol. 126, no. 522, (October 2011), p. 1138.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, *Ring of Steel*, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Watson, 'Fighting for Another Fatherland', p. 1148.

<sup>13</sup> Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1914-1918', p. 97.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

Russian railway system.<sup>14</sup> What is more, a scheme for pre-mobilisation preparation allowed for the advance call-up of Russian Army reservists west of the Vistula River in the Congress Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> The net effect of these measures was that the early battles of the war were fought with a higher than normal representation of Poles in Russian formations.

The impact of mobilisation on Poles was more mixed in the Central Powers' camp at the outbreak of war. The Poles mobilised into the Austro-Hungarian Army, as was the case in the Russian Empire, also faced the prospect of war on their doorstep. At this stage of the war, Austro-Hungarian formations with high percentages of Poles saw service almost exclusively on the eastern front, or the 'northern' front as it was known in the Habsburg Empire.<sup>16</sup> Galicia, like the Congress Kingdom, was an arena of the northern front that saw heavy fighting and heavy losses of men and material in 1914-1915.<sup>17</sup> For the Poles in Imperial Germany the prospect of facing fellow Poles on the battlefield was lessened by the fact that German war plans had the main part of the initial military effort directed against the French and British in the west. The army of the Kaiser's Germany stood on the defensive in the east. Nevertheless, this only temporarily delayed the reality of Poles of Imperial Germany fighting their kinfolk in opposing armies.<sup>18</sup>

For Polish society divided between three states and two warring camps, the outbreak of war inevitably meant Polish fratricide resulting from involuntary participation in a war that was not of Polish making. The Polish tragedy of the First World War was that the alignment of the war camps led to brother fighting brother. For the Poles the circumstances of war created enormous dilemmas and would test their loyalty to each of the partitioning powers. These circumstances unsurprisingly generated pathos, but also a new optimism about the future. This contradictory *zeitgeist* was captured by the forty-two-year-old Polish poet Edward Słoiński in a poem entitled 'The One Which Has Not Perished' (*Ta, co nie zginęła*) published in 1915. Its lyrics captured the mixture of melancholy resulting from the prospect of Poles killing Poles

---

<sup>14</sup> Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Marian Zgórniak, 'Polacy w armii Austro-Węgierskiej w czasie i wojny światowej', in: *Studia i Materiały do historii wojskowości XXX*, (Ossolineum: 1988), p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> Gunther E. Rothenburg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette, IL: Purdue University Press, 1976), pp. 179-180.

<sup>18</sup> Ryszard Kaczmarek, *Polacy w armii kajzera na frontach pierwszej wojny światowej*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), pp. 105-116.

and a sense of expectancy grounded in the political opportunity the war had opened up for the possible re-emergence of an independent Polish state.<sup>19</sup>

### **Pre-war and Wartime Military Integration of Poles**

Apart from the thousands of Polish conscripts and mobilised reservists who marched to war in the armies of the partitioning powers, the officer corps of the armies of Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire included Poles within their ranks. Only Imperial Germany followed a military policy of deliberate exclusion of Poles from the leadership cadre of the pre-war army. The level of integration of Polish subjects into the professional officer corps of Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire was the product of differing political conditions experienced by the Polish population in the states of each of these partitioning powers. Superficially, one might assume that some Poles were willing to accommodate themselves to the states they resided in and indeed were willing to serve them. The reasons for elements of the Polish population to embark on military careers in the armies of the partitioning powers are more complex. These can range from the tradition of noble and gentry families entering military service to the 'gradual embourgeoisement' of the Dual Monarchy's officer corps in the latter half of the nineteenth century that created opportunities for social advancement.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, such a career had its costs. Military service in the armies of the partitioning powers risked accusations of a lack of patriotism or worse of traitorous behaviour.<sup>21</sup> Loyal service did not, however, mean total identification with the state in which Poles did military service. Józef Haller, who served in the Austro-Hungarian Army as an artillery officer, viewed his military service as time spent in a 'foreign army'.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the reason for embarking on a military career, officers of Polish nationality acquired valuable military experience that was later transferable to a reconstituted Polish Army. Some Poles simply enjoyed soldiering. Józef Dowbór Muśnicki and his two brothers became officers in the Russian Army

---

<sup>19</sup> Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland Volume II 1795 to the Present* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 380.

<sup>20</sup> István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 163; Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1914-1918', pp. 215-216.

<sup>21</sup> Mariusz Kulik, 'Kariery polskich generałów w armii rosyjskiej przed pierwszą wojną światową', in: Piotr Matusak, Marek Plewczyński and Marek Wagner, *Czyn zbrojny w dziejach narodu polskiego, studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Januszowi Wojtasikowi w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin* (Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Akademii Podlaskiej, 2004), p. 220 and Piotr Stawecki, *Generałowie polscy: zarys portretu zbiorowego 1776-1945* (Waszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, 2010), p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Józef Haller, *Pamiętniki z wyborem dokumentów i zdjęć* (Łomianki: Wydawnictwo LTW, 2015), p. 48.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

because they had an 'outstanding passion for the military profession'.<sup>23</sup> Both Haller and Dowbór Muśnicki later became generals in the Polish Army.

Constraints on a military career for Poles were comparatively few in Austria-Hungary. Poles made up 9.9% of the population of Austria-Hungary.<sup>24</sup> In 1910, career Polish officers amounted to 2.5% of the officer corps while rank and file soldiers of Polish nationality made up 7.9% of the army's manpower.<sup>25</sup> Figures from 1911 indicated that in the officer corps of the Austro-Hungarian Army 2.7% of regular officers and 3.3% of reserve officers were of Polish nationality.<sup>26</sup> The Austro-Hungarian Army required an officer corps that was multilingual. German was the official language of command with about eighty standard German commands officially mandated in the Austro-Hungarian Army but with the composition of most units in the army multinational and 'national languages' enjoying official status in the Dual Monarchy, in practice communication also took place in the languages of the nationalities represented in a given unit.<sup>27</sup> However, with 76% of the Habsburg officer corps made up of Germans, pragmatism did not always prevail and inflexible application of rules fuelled resentment among non-German officers. In his memoirs, Haller recounted an inspection when he was conducting training on topography using a Polish-language map. The senior inspecting officer gave Haller a severe dressing down for not using a German map. Haller recognized the absurdity of the situation insofar as most of the officers he was instructing were Poles.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the comparative lack of official obstacles to Polish officers' advancement in Austro-Hungarian service, during the First World War proportionately few of them reached the senior ranks of the greatly expanded wartime army. Between 1914 and 1918, there were 39 generals of Polish nationality comprising 2.4% of the generals serving the Habsburg monarchy.<sup>29</sup> These senior Polish officers could be found on corps and army staffs but in operational command did not rise above the level of brigade or division.<sup>30</sup> The percentage of Polish formation commanders was very small amounting to only 1.7% of those commanding brigades and 1.2% of divisional commanders. Moreover, the length of formation command appointments held by

---

<sup>23</sup> Józef Dowbór Muśnicki, *Wspomnienia* (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Bellona, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Zgórniak, 'Polacy w armii Austro-Węgierskiej w czasie I wojny światowej', p. 233.

<sup>25</sup> Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, p. 183.

<sup>26</sup> Zgórniak, *Studia i rozprawy*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>27</sup> Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>28</sup> Haller, *Pamiętniki*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Andrzej Wojtaszak, *Generacja Wojska Polskiego 1918-1926* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, 2012), pp. 27-28.

<sup>30</sup> Zgórniak, *Studia i rozprawy*, p. 155.

Poles tended to be short, with no outstanding commanders emerging from this group of officers.<sup>31</sup> The proportion of serving lower-ranking Polish officers was significantly higher than among general grade officers in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the war. As this group was more numerous it would have an important role after the war in reconstructing the Polish Army.<sup>32</sup>

On the surface, the prospects for officers of Polish nationality in Russian military service were less good than for their Austro-Hungarian military counterparts because of greater official impediments. In the wake of the 1863 uprising the Russian military establishment mistrusted Poles and that led to measures to impede the development of senior officers of Polish nationality. Added to this was a tendency to post officers of Polish nationality outside Polish-inhabited parts of the Russia Empire. Russian policy closed a range of military posts and administrative appointments to Poles and in the last quarter of the nineteenth century a regulation restricted the percentage of Catholic officers in the promotion pool. The religious bar also prevented Catholics from attending the top Russian military school, the General Staff Academy.<sup>33</sup> For most Polish officers this prohibition in peacetime meant that fewer of them would ever reach the rank of general in the Russian Army officer corps.<sup>34</sup>

However, despite these constraints, other factors mitigated against the efforts to limit promotion chances for officers of Polish nationality. As one of Europe's largest armies, the size of the Russian Army meant that it had a large officer corps where overall numbers created more places. A snapshot of the Russian Army in 1903 showed that it had 55 generals of Polish nationality (3.8% of all generals), 160 colonels (5.9% of all colonels) and 549 captains (12.9% of all captains).<sup>35</sup> The fact that there were so many generals of Polish nationality was due to two factors: some of the Polish generals were promoted before the restrictions on Catholics went into force, and the bar on Catholics at the general staff academy did not extend to Protestants. Although overwhelmingly Catholic, some Polish officers chose to declare themselves Protestants in order to gain entrance to the general staff

---

<sup>31</sup> Michał Baczkowski, 'Żołnierze polscy w armii austro-węgierskiej w przededniu odzyskania przez Polskę niepodległości', *Studia Historyczne*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2009), p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Zgórnjak, *Studia i rozprawy*, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> Dowbór Muśnicki, *Wspomnienia*, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Stanisław Czerep, *Generałowie i admirałowie polskiego pochodzenia w armii rosyjskiej 1914-1917* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, 2014), pp. 59-82.

<sup>35</sup> Tadeusz Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1874-1914', in: *Studia i Materiały do Historii Wojskowości*, vol. 30 (Ossolineum: 1988), p. 214.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

academy.<sup>36</sup> Józef Dowbór Muśnicki was one such example.<sup>37</sup> Apart from finding means to gain representation in the highest strata of the Russian Army's officer corps, Russia's involvement in smaller wars created opportunities for officers of Polish nationality to gain military experience and promotion.<sup>38</sup> Polish officers in the Russian Army served in the Russian contingent in the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900 and in the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905.<sup>39</sup> Thus some Polish officers in Russian military service could claim, unlike their counterparts in the armies of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany, to have gained operational experience prior to the First World War.

In the course of the First World War an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 officers of Polish nationality served in the Russian Army. This figure includes both full-time serving professionals and mobilised reserve officers.<sup>40</sup> It is clear that wartime conditions in the expanded Russian Army created many opportunities for promotion and important command appointments. As a consequence, officers of Polish nationality rose to corps, division and brigade command to a greater extent than found in the wartime Austro-Hungarian Army.<sup>41</sup> Given the chaotic conditions that existed in Russia, particularly after the outbreak of revolution in 1917, profiling in detail numbers and percentages of Polish officers by rank structure has proved difficult. Nevertheless, one recent study by Stanisław Czerep examined the numbers of generals of Polish origin in the Russian Army who served between 1914 and 1917. Czerep's research found that there were 205 generals and 30 admirals of Polish origin in the wartime Russian Army and Navy.<sup>42</sup> These figures suggest that the numbers of generals of Polish nationality in Russian service exceeded the 55 serving just over a decade earlier. It must be recognized, however, that not all of the 235 senior officers examined by Czerep necessarily identified themselves any longer with Polish nationality or Polish aspirations.<sup>43</sup> What the evidence does suggest is that, despite official constraints, officers of Polish nationality in Russian service did as well or better than Poles serving in the Austro-Hungarian officer corps in both the pre-war and wartime period.

With Germany barring Poles from being commissioned into the Army's pre-war officer corps, integration of Poles did not exist above the lowest enlisted ranks.

---

<sup>36</sup> Kulik, 'Kariery polskich generałów', p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> Czerep, *Generałowie i admirałowie*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>38</sup> Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1914-1918', p. 104.

<sup>39</sup> Kulik, 'Kariery polskich generałów', pp. 219-220.

<sup>40</sup> Marian Romeyko, *Przed i po maju* (Warszawa: MON, 1967), p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Radziwonowicz, 'Polacy w armii Rosyjskiej 1914-1918', pp. 104-105.

<sup>42</sup> Czerep, *Generałowie i admirałowie*, p. 328.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

Moreover, pre-war Polish conscripts were sent outside Polish-speaking provinces and dispersed in small numbers in German units to foster assimilation. Ironically, German mobilisation plans led to Poles being mobilised close to home, thereby creating a concentration of Polish soldiers in locally-mobilised units.<sup>44</sup> Once at war the ordinary Polish enlisted soldier faced, in addition to the dangers on the battlefield, the additional burden of having to serve a cause he had little sympathy for.<sup>45</sup> The combination of the German pre-war legacy of political oppression of its Polish subjects and the concentration of Poles in units at mobilisation in 1914 set the conditions for a high desertion rate among Polish soldiers in the German Army in France in 1914-15. In fact there were varying degrees of unreliability depending on where Poles came from in Imperial Germany. Poles from the Poznań province were the most likely to desert with Masurian and Silesian Poles proving more reliable. By adopting a policy of distributing Poles in small numbers in German military units (not unlike that used for training pre-war Polish conscripts) greater control, more combat effectiveness and less desertion was achieved after 1915.<sup>46</sup> Wartime needs eventually removed the bar on Poles serving as officers in the German Army. In the closing year of the war 700 Poles gained commissions in the German Army serving mostly as junior officers.<sup>47</sup> It was a change driven by crisis and not accommodation.

### **The Emergence of Polish Military Formations**

The outbreak of a general European war fostered not only the revival of the Polish question as a matter for European politics but created conditions for the emergence of Polish military formations. The revival of Polish military capability had two aspects – political and military. Polish political parties on both the left and right actively sought the establishment of military units ostensibly to support the war efforts of states in both warring camps. The actual reason for Polish political backing for the development of armed formations was to forward the aspiration of rebuilding a Polish state. The support for Polish political aspirations across the warring camps was more cautious, with wartime military requirements driving policy more than a clear commitment to a future Poland. A political bidding war for Polish support for each camp's cause culminated in the November 1916 Austro-Hungarian and German declaration calling for an independent Poland. This may have been a significant political milestone in the recreation of Poland, but ultimately it was the military desire to harness Polish manpower by Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the

---

<sup>44</sup> Watson, 'Fighting for Another Fatherland', pp. 1143-1144.

<sup>45</sup> See Kaczmarek, *Polacy w armii kajzera* and the collection of wartime letters written by a Polish soldier from Pomerania (Pomorze): Józef Iwicki, *Z myślą o niepodległej: listy Polaka żołnierza armii niemieckiej z okopów I wojny światowej 1914-1918* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Wydawnictwo, 1978).

<sup>46</sup> Watson, 'Fighting for Another Fatherland', pp. 1150-1152, 1156-1159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1145.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

Russian Empire (and France) that underwrote the emergence of Polish military formations by their sponsor states.<sup>48</sup>

### **Pre-war Polish Paramilitary Organisations**

The decade before the outbreak of the First World War saw the emergence of Polish paramilitary organisations. Some of these organisations took the form of gymnastic societies to promote physical fitness so as to evade closure by the suspicious authorities of the partitioning powers but whose thinly disguised rationale was in fact to produce patriotic individuals who were fit for future military service. The most significant arena for Polish paramilitary activity was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With Russia increasingly seen as the Dual Monarchy's future adversary and fears of Russia cultivating pro-Russian ideas amongst the Empire's Ruthenian (Ukrainian) population in Galicia, Vienna saw Polish support as a means of increasing Austro-Hungarian military potential in a future war with Russia. The fact that the liberal conditions found in Galicia (an autonomous province controlled by a Polish-dominated provincial government) made it a magnet for the anti-Russian and insurrectionary Polish socialists, contributed to a shift in Austro-Hungarian policy away from proscription of such groups and a move in the direction of active support, including sanctioning the creation of Polish paramilitary organizations. Indeed, General Franz Conrad Graf von Hötzendorf, Chief of Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Army, in a note written to the Minister of War on 11 July 1910, argued that 'it lies in the interest of the army the abandonment of systematic persecution of the party [Polish socialist]'.<sup>49</sup> The Austro-Hungarian government did not limit their interest to the left wing of Polish politics but sought support across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, the pre-war Austro-Hungarian policy setting conditions for wartime 'national mobilisation' walked a difficult political tight-rope by wanting to encourage Polish paramilitary activity in support of the aims of the Dual Monarchy but in a manner that did not concede too much autonomy to these groups. The outbreak of war would make plain how difficult it was to control these national military formations.<sup>50</sup>

By 1912, Polish paramilitary organizations in Galicia enjoyed the legal sanction and support of the Austro-Hungarian government. The oldest of these groups was based on the 'Sokół' (Falcon) organization. The *Polskie Towarzystwo Gimnastyczne Sokół* (Polish

---

<sup>48</sup> Janusz Pajewski, *Odbudowa państwa polskiego 1914-1918* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2005), p. 105; Piotr Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland: 1795-1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), pp. 340-354.

<sup>49</sup> Note by General Franz Conrad Graf von Hötzendorf, 11 July 1910 in: Stefan Arski and Józef Chudek (compilers), *Galicyjska działalność wojskowa Piłsudskiego 1906-1914 dokumenty* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967), p. 494.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, *Ring of Steel*, pp. 97-99.

Gymnastic Society – Falcon) was founded in 1867 in Lwów to promote patriotic ideals and physical fitness. It spread beyond Austria-Hungary with branches set up in Germany and with the largest segment of the organization to be found in the United States. Its political affiliation was with the right-wing National Democratic Party (*Narodowa Demokracja*).<sup>51</sup> Taking advantage of the favourable policy of the Austro-Hungarian government, it created a paramilitary organization called the *Polowe Drużny Sokole* (Falcon Field Squads). Between 1912 and 1914 the *Polowe Drużny Sokole* membership grew to 7,000.<sup>52</sup> The origins of the Polish paramilitary groups in Galicia affiliated with the left of Polish politics began in the early twentieth century. The first of these paramilitary groups was the *Związek Walki Czynnej* – ZWC (Union of Active Struggle), founded in 1908. Affiliated with the *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna* – PPS (Polish Socialist Party), the ZWC had the purpose of preparing leadership cadre for an insurrection in Russian Poland. The ZWC was a clandestine organization with a few hundred members until 1912.<sup>53</sup> After 1912, the ZWC was transformed into a larger paramilitary organization known as the ‘*Strzelec*’ (rifleman). In fact, ‘*Strzelec*’ operated as two groups, the *Związek Strzelecki* – ZS (Rifleman’s Association) in Kraków and the *Towarzystwo ‘Strzelec’* – TS (Rifleman’s Society) in Lwów. Politically, the ‘*Strzelec*’ paramilitary organization was linked to a council that included political representation of a range of left wing groups including peasant and socialist groups.<sup>54</sup> ‘*Strzelec*’ had a membership of just over 7,000 in March 1914. In this complicated mix can also be added the *Polski Drużyny Strzeleckie* (Polish Rifle Squads) that possessed 6,000 members by the eve of the war.<sup>55</sup> Overall, Polish paramilitary formations in Galicia had at least 20,000 members by the outbreak of the First World War.

Polish paramilitary organizations could not develop in military terms without the connivance of the Austro-Hungarian authorities. The various Polish paramilitary organizations in Galicia managed to acquire arms and ammunition and even to publish a range of doctrine pamphlets as a guide to training, with some of these publications drawing on Austro-Hungarian Army publications.<sup>56</sup> One such example of these publications was the *Podręcznik elementarnego kursu ćwiczeń polowych dla stałych drużyn*

---

<sup>51</sup> Jerzy Holzer and Jan Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej* (Warszawa: PW Wiedza Powszechna, 1973), pp. 494-495.

<sup>52</sup> Mieczysław Wrzosek: *Polski czyn zbrojny podczas pierwszej wojny światowej 1914 – 1918* (Warszawa: PW Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> Holzer and Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej*, p. 521.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 503-504.

<sup>55</sup> Wrzosek: *Polski czyn zbrojny*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>56</sup> See: Report of Commander I Corps for the Minister of War, Vienna 30 May 1912 and Report of Commander II Corps for the Minister of War, Vienna 27 August 1912 in: Arski and Chudek (compilers), *Galicyjska działalność wojskowa Piłsudskiego 1906-1914 dokumenty*, pp. 550-551, 566-567.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

*sokolich* (Manual: Elementary Course for Field Exercises for Falcon Squads) to provide assistance to training.<sup>57</sup> The Polish paramilitary organization that produced this manual, the *Polowe Drużny Sokole*, in July 1913 managed to conduct a field exercise that included 6,600 infantry, 56 mounted troops and 860 scouts indicating the scale of its ambition and the level of toleration for these activities by the Austro-Hungarian authorities.<sup>58</sup>

### **The Creation of Polish Military Formations 1914-1918**

*August 1914: Piłsudski and 1 Cadre Company*

The impact of Austro-Hungarian encouragement of Polish paramilitary organizations was to be revealed dramatically in the opening days of the First World War. What soon became evident was that Austro-Hungarian control of its Polish formations was not to be so easily maintained. The man responsible for highlighting Austro-Hungarian problems in controlling its Polish paramilitary partners was Józef Klemens Piłsudski. Piłsudski was a man with a revolutionary past and wide political experience in the PPS. Born on 5 December 1867 to a minor gentry family in Poland's eastern borderlands, Piłsudski was less enamoured with socialist ideology than the Polish tradition of insurrectionary nationalism. The PPS was, however, a socialist revolutionary means to an insurrectionary nationalist end. He served a period of exile in Siberia between 1887 and 1892, became a leading figure in the PPS from 1893 and organized combat squads in the Russian revolution of 1905 before shifting his activities to the more politically comfortable environment of Austro-Hungarian Galicia. He was the co-creator of the ZWC and in due course became the commandant of the 'Strzelec' paramilitary groups.<sup>59</sup> The strong anti-Russian orientation of his politics coincided with Austro-Hungarian interests to build its military potential through national mobilisation against a Russian threat.<sup>60</sup> The best summary of Piłsudski and his politics was given in the post-war memoirs of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Lloyd George believed that there was no more apt description of Piłsudski than 'Jacobin turned jingo'.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> *Podręcznik elementarnego kursu ćwiczeń polowych dla stałych drużyn sokolich* (Lwów: 1913).

<sup>58</sup> Wrzosek: *Polski czyn zbrojny*, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> For a range of biographers' perspectives on Piłsudski see: M. K. Dziewanowski, *Joseph Piłsudski: A European Federalist 1918-1922*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1969); Andrzej Garlicki, *Józef Piłsudski 1867-1935*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2008); and, Wacław Jędrzewicz, *Józef Piłsudski 1867-1935: Życiorys*, (Łomianki: Wydawnictwo LTW, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Watson, *Ring of Steel*, p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> David Lloyd George, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties Volume I* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938), p. 310.

At the outbreak of war Piłsudski seized the opportunity to exploit the changed situation by planning to spark an insurrection in the Russian controlled Congress Kingdom and demonstrating that the Polish paramilitary formations were capable of independent action and were not mere appendages of Austria-Hungary.<sup>62</sup> Mobilizing *1 Kompania Kadrowa* (1 Cadre Company) in Kraków, which was based on 'Strzelec' units in the city, Piłsudski intended to move his tiny command of 144 riflemen into the Congress Kingdom before the Austro-Hungarian authorities could bring a halt to his plan.<sup>63</sup> His aim was to trigger a Polish insurrection against Russian rule in the Congress Kingdom as a means of advancing the goal of recreating an independent Poland. Using methods that are all too familiar to the 21<sup>st</sup> century non-state actor, Piłsudski preceded his advance into the Congress Kingdom by issuing a proclamation announcing the formation of a fictional national government in Warsaw that appointed him supreme commander and called for a Polish uprising against Russian rule.<sup>64</sup> Three days earlier, Piłsudski, in addressing his riflemen on 3 August 1914, spoke of the great purpose that lay ahead for them:

It is your great honour to be the first ones to go to the Kingdom and cross the border into Russian-controlled territory as the leading column of the Polish army on its way to fight for the liberation of Poland... I look to you as the cadres that will form the basis for the Polish army...<sup>65</sup>

On 6 August the first elements of 1 Cadre Company crossed Austria-Hungary's border with Russia and entered the Congress Kingdom. They would be followed by five infantry battalions and two cavalry detachments of the mobilised 'Strzelec' force.<sup>66</sup> By 12 August Piłsudski's force had entered the town of Kielce but it was clear that the conditions for starting an insurrection in the Congress Kingdom were not propitious. The local population feared joining Piłsudski's movement and German actions in bombarding the town of Kalisz angered the Polish population of the Congress Kingdom. The PPS enjoyed few adherents in the areas Piłsudski's force operated in and his political opponents on the right declined their support and saw his action as that of an adventurer.<sup>67</sup> Apart from a distinct lack of success in

---

<sup>62</sup> Wandycz, *Lands of Partitioned Poland*, p. 331.

<sup>63</sup> Wacław Jędrzewicz, *Kronika życia Józefa Piłsudskiego 1867-1935 Tom I* (London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1981), p. 276.

<sup>64</sup> 'Proclamation of a National Government', 10 August 1914, in Stanisław Biegański and Andrzej Suchcitz, *Korespondencja 1914-17* (London: Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego, 1986), pp. 11-12.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

<sup>66</sup> Wacław Lipiński, *Walka zbrojna o niepodległość Polski c latach 1905-1918* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Olumen, 1990), p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Wandycz, *Lands of Partitioned Poland*, p. 332.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

fomenting an insurrection in the Congress Kingdom, Piłsudski soon found that the Austro-Hungarian government moved swiftly to rein in his freelance military campaign. On 13 August 1914 the Austro-Hungarian Commander of Operational Group Kummer was ordered to place Piłsudski and his riflemen firmly under Austro-Hungarian military command.<sup>68</sup> Piłsudski's foray into the Congress Kingdom could be viewed an episode of political theatre that achieved nothing concrete. However, for Piłsudski it marked the beginning of the construction of a political narrative that would eventually see him as the leader of an independent Poland in 1918. The more immediate and tangible result of his actions in 1914 was to ensure that Austria-Hungary formally made Polish military formations part of its war effort. On 27 August 1914 a directive from Archduke Frederick, the Commander-in-Chief, created the Polish Legions incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Army, with Polish being the language of command.<sup>69</sup>

### **Scale of Polish Military Formations 1914-1918**

In the course of the next four years of war, multiple Polish military formations raised by states in each of the two warring camps emerged. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine in detail the story of each of the Polish military formations created during the war and the attendant politics of the Polish question, providing an overview of the scale of the forces raised indicates their place in efforts to mobilise the Polish population in the war efforts of the Central and Entente powers. Table 2 provides a summary of the Polish Military Formations raised during the course of the First World War and indicates which state or group of states sponsored these formations and in what period they were active. Although the numbers under arms in these Polish formations fluctuated, the figure given was the approximate maximum strength attained during the period of the war.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Telephone message from Supreme Command of the Army to Commander Operational Group Kummer in: Commander of Arski and Chudek (compilers), *Galicyska działalność wojskowa Piłsudskiego 1906-1914 dokumenty*, pp. 639-640.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, Directive of the Commander-in-Chief, Archduke Frederick, on the Creation of Polish Legions, pp. 671-673.

<sup>70</sup> Statistics for Table 2 taken from Henryk Bagiński, *Wojsko Polskie na Wschodzie 1914-1920* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Gryf, 1990), p. 174; Michał Klimecki, 'Legiony Polskie 1914-1916', in Bogusław Polak (ed.), *Wojsko Polskie 1914-1922 Tom I* (Koszalin Wydawnictwo Uczelniane Wyższej Szkoły Inżynierskiej w Koszalinie, 1986), pp. 75-76; Wrzosek, *Polski czyn zbrojny*, p. 373 and p. 476.

<b>Principal Formations</b>	<b>Sponsoring State(s)</b>	<b>Period in Existence</b>	<b>Maximum Strength</b>
<i>Legiony Polskie</i> (Polish Legions)	Austria-Hungary	1914-1917	c25,000
<i>Wojsko Polskie na Wschodzie</i> (Polish Army in the East)	Russian Empire	1914-1917	c14,000
<i>Polska Siła Zbrojna</i> [ <i>Polnische Wehrmacht</i> ] (Polish Armed Forces)	Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany	1917-1918	c9,000
<i>Armia Polska we Francji</i> (Polish Army in France)	Britain, France and the United States	1917-1918	c17,000

**Table 2:** Polish Military Formations 1914-18

The peak strengths of these Polish formations created during the First World War yielded about 65,000 additional troops for the state sponsors in the respective warring camps. While not insignificant, this number is dwarfed by the over 2,200,000 Poles conscripted into military service by Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire. The Polish Legions and the Polish Army in the East had the most continuous operational employment up to the end of 1917 and performed well on the battlefield.<sup>71</sup> The Polish Armed Forces and Polish Army in France had limited or no operational experience with the former formation beset by political problems and the latter established late in the war.<sup>72</sup> For the sponsor states, Polish military formations raised in wartime also came at a significant political cost as their existence was intimately linked to the diplomacy of the Polish question.

### **Conclusion: Legacy of Wartime Mobilisation**

Assessing the impact of the mobilisation of Poles and the creation of Polish military formations during the First World War has two features. The first is the wartime impact of mobilizing Poles across three of the combatant states. The significance of the contribution of Polish manpower to the war efforts of the three partitioning powers can be measured in the losses of soldiers of Polish nationality in the four years of war. In the Austro-Hungarian case dead amounted to 86,000 or 12.5% of the 720,000 Poles mobilised or 9.9% of all military dead of the Austro-Hungarian

<sup>71</sup> See Bagiński, *Wojsko Polskie na Wschodzie*, and Michał Klimecki and Krzysztof Filipow, *Legiony Polskie: dzieje bojowe i organizacyjne* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Henryk Bułhak, 'Początki Armii Polskiej na ziemi Francuskiej w latach pierwszej wojny światowej', in Polak (ed.), *Wojsko Polskie*, pp. 163-87; Wrzosek: *Polski czyn zbrojny*, pp. 360-373.

## SEED CORN OF A FUTURE ARMY

Empire.<sup>73</sup> Polish casualties in the army of Imperial Germany numbered about 130,000 dead or 15.3% of the 850,000 Poles mobilised.<sup>74</sup> Assessing the numbers of Polish fatalities in the Russian Army presents more challenges because of the chaotic conditions that developed in the course of the war. One source puts the dead of Polish nationality at 60,000 which would represent 8% of the estimated maximum of 750,000 Poles in the wartime Russian Army.<sup>75</sup> Wartime fatalities of soldiers of Polish nationality averaged across the three armies about 12% with a total of 387,000 dead. Nevertheless, supplying over 2,000,000 soldiers to three armies of the partitioning powers represented a sizeable pool of military manpower. Soldiers of Polish nationality proved to be generally reliable enough in wartime operational service. With Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Russian Empire all being to one degree or another multinational in composition and harbouring discontented national minorities, it highlights the significant achievement in obtaining military utility from the mobilised Polish manpower.

The second major feature falling out from the mobilisation of Poles and the creation of Polish military formations was its impact on the reconstruction of the post-war Polish Army. Between 1918 and 1921 the Polish Army would fight a number of small and large wars in the consolidation of the reborn Polish state and its frontiers. In short, it was an army being built while in contact with the enemy. The most critical group drawn on from the wartime mobilisation in all its aspects was the leadership cadre inherited from the armies of the partitioning powers and Polish formations raised during the war. In the period 1918-1920 over 45,000 officers served in the Polish Army drawn from a variety of sources: the Piłsudski group (Legions) 2,500, the Russian Army 25,000, the Austro-Hungarian Army 12,000-15,000, the German Army 1,000 and the Polish Army in France 1,500-1,750.<sup>76</sup> During the crisis in the Polish-Soviet war in August 1920 the Polish Army reached a level of 850,000 and would peak at 1,000,000 men under arms in autumn 1920.<sup>77</sup> Such a build-up was undoubtedly aided by the new Poland having at its disposal a manpower pool already possessing wartime military experience acquired in the previous four years of the First World War. The wartime mobilisation laid the foundations for the reconstruction of the Polish Army in the years immediately following the First World War. Without having manpower with military experience to draw on this task would have been well-nigh impossible.

---

<sup>73</sup> Zgórniak, 'Polacy w armii Austro-Węgierskiej', pp. 243-244.

<sup>74</sup> Watson, 'Fighting for Another Fatherland', p. 1138.

<sup>75</sup> Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, 'Sytuacja demograficzna narodu polskiego w latach 1914-1918', in Kormanowa and Najdus, *Historia Polski Tom II*, p. 506.

<sup>76</sup> Romeyko, *Przed i po maju*, p. 73.

<sup>77</sup> Mikołaj J. Szczepkowski. 'Zarys organizacji wojska polskiego w latach 1918-1920', in *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny*, vol. 35, nos. 3-4 (Lipiec-Grudzień 1990), p. 20.