

TAC NEWS

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INTO THE VIPER'S NEST

1st Polish Army and the Final Assault on Berlin - 1945

The Polish 1st Army serving as part of the Soviet 1st Byelorussian Front during the last few months of WWII was at the very forefront of the last great Eastfront campaign, the one that saw the last Nazi strongholds taken, the last forces smashed, and the Nazi capitol, Berlin, laid in ruins. The exploits of this army and the epic sacrifices made by the men who served in it cannot die. But history has a way of pushing certain events into the shadows and bringing others into stark relief. This article is an attempt to, in some small way, redress the balance and remind us all of the courage and faith displayed by the Poles during the world's darkest hours.

The Last "Winter Offensive"

Shortly after entering the ruins of Warsaw on January 10th 1945, 1st Army, as part of 1st Byelorussian Front, moved northwest towards Bydgoszcz, where it arrived after a grueling two-week march through some of the harshest winter weather in one hundred years. On 28 January, Zukov (1st Byelorussian Front Commander) ordered them to cross the old Polish-German border and pursue the fleeing Germans. This they did, with no pause for rest or refit, only to find themselves entangled in the formidable system of fortifications built by the Germans in the 1930's, the so called "Pomern Stellung" (Fortress Pomerania). Some of these fortifications had become obsolete or had fallen into disrepair. However, the Nazi's

had drafted huge numbers of Poles into slave labor gangs during the summer of 1944 to rebuild and strengthen them and they now represented a serious, and largely unsuspected, barrier to



any Red Army advance. General Poplawski, the army's commander (who replaced General Berling after his disastrous performance in battle before Warsaw the previous September), split his forces into two assault groups and moved these forward under cover of darkness.

Early on 29 January, the border was actually crossed at Sepolno-Krajewskie and Wiedbork. On the night of January 29/30 soldiers of the 1st Army captured their first German prisoners of the operation and learned that before them lay a heavily fortified line. Despite this, General Poplawski did not think it necessary to send reconnaissance groups to probe the enemy line. Instead he simply ordered his tired and hungry troops forward. The resulting casualties, of course, were appalling. By late afternoon on the 30th, The Poles were standing on the East bank of the Gwda River, crossing it at the town of Grudna and continuing toward Podgaje. The initial attack on this village was repelled after fierce fighting, with many Poles taken prisoner. Reinforcements were called forward and a fierce battle raged here over the next three days. Finally, on 3 February, the last German troops withdrew. Podgaje was taken. Lack of proper reconnaissance and leadership had cost the Polish 1st Division alone 233 killed, 520 wounded, and 58 missing. Added to this was the sight that greeted the men in an old barn. Troops of the 15th SS Division had burned thirty-two Polish POWs alive!

The offensive halted for the next three days. Then, on 6 February, General Poplawski ordered his men to exploit a small break in the German line at Dobrzyce. Heavy fighting continued as the division moved forward, finally reaching Mirosławiec on 20 February. After Mirosławiec the army was again put in reserve and wasn't called into battle until 1 March when it was placed between 1st and 2nd Byelorussian Fronts. After three days of heavy fighting, German lines were ruptured again and the advance continued.



Between 5 and 7 March, Polish 1st Army participated in the elimination of a German pocket south of Swidwina. During this action Poles captured the commander of 10th SS Corps, General Leutnant Gunther von Krappe and the commander of the "Barwalde" division General Leutnant Wilhelm von Raithl.

By 8 March, Western Pomerania was nearly cleared of German troops, and on the 9th, 1st army moved toward Szczecin, reaching the Odra River by late afternoon on the 10th. 1st Army soon found itself engaged in a bloody battle for Koldorzeg that lasted for a full eleven days. After that, until 6 April, 1st Army was allowed to stand on the Odra, receiving reinforcements and awaiting orders for the final offensive in the war.

Closing the Ring

At 0615 on 16 April 1945 after a thirty-minute bombardment, the Poles began crossing the Odra at Siekierki. As always, concentrated artillery fire had failed to destroy German machine gun nests and artillery positions as planned, and the troops crossed the river under heavy German fire sustaining severe losses. Despite this, the advance continued unabated. By 16 April, most of the Polish 1st Infantry Division was holding a small bridgehead that was reinforced during the night.



They were soon driving the Germans west, reaching the

Between 17 and 19 April the rest of 1st Army crossed the river, broke through German lines, and linked up with the heavily pressed 1st Division.

Hohenzollern canal on 24 April. Here they took up defensive positions to protect the rear of Soviet forces engaged in encircling Berlin. On 25 April, 2nd Division helped to beat back a German counter attack at the Ruppiner canal, an action often referred to as "Steiner's Odsiecz" (Steiner's Odyssey).

Storming the Viper's Nest

In the last days of April it was decided that Polish units should participate in the capture of Berlin. Taking part in this epic event was a huge propaganda victory for the Polish communists. The message they wished to send was clear. It was the Polish Army created by Stalin and not the Polish Armies of the west that had defeated Hitler. The communist Poles, therefore, should have the final say as to the fate of post-war Poland.

On 29 April, 1st Army moved by truck, first to Wittenau and then Charlottenburg (in Berlin's northeastern suburbs). The 1st Polish Division was attached to the Soviet 2nd Guards Tank Army and its regiments were split among the brigades of the 12th Guards Tank Corps. During two days of bloody fighting they attacked German positions along the Franklinstrasse, and on 2 May linked up with troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front.

Other Poles attacked German positions along Berlinerstrasse working towards the Tiergarten finally reaching the grounds of the Berlin Politechnik, the ruins of which had been turned into a stronghold. Capturing this, they continued to move through the sport stadium and along Kurfurstenallee annihilating German pockets of resistance as they went. By the middle of the day they had linked up with Soviet units assaulting from the south.

Things began moving quickly. The Poles next went into action at Schlossplatz between Neue Kanstrasse and Bismarckstrasse hammering their way east. By late afternoon on 1 May Berlin officially capitulated and the Poles received the news at 0700 on 2 May. However, the last of the fighting did not end until 1300. The viper was dead!

POLISH 1ST ARMY

RED ARMY: 1944 - 1945

INFANTRY DIVISION

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Infantry Co.: | 3xInfantry, 2xMMG |
| Submachinegun Co.: | 3xSMG Infantry |
| Support Co.: | 1xSMG Infantry, 1x12.7mm AAMG, 1x45mm or 57mm ATG/Limber |
| Gun Battery: | 1x76mm Infantry Gun(3)/Limber |
| Mortar Battery: | 1x120mm Mortar(3)/Wagon |
| Anti-Tank Company: | 3x45mm or 3X57mm ATG/Limber |
| Infantry Battalion: | 1xInfantry (HQ), 3xInfantry Company, 1xSupport Co., 1x82mm Mortar(3) |
| Brigade Support Group: | 1xSubmachinegun Co., 1xGun Battery, 1xMortar Battery, 1xAnti-Tank Co. |
| Infantry Brigade: | 1xInfantry (GHQ), 3xInfantry Battalion, 1xBrigade Support Group |

Infantry Division: 3xInfantry Brigade

Division Assets

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1xRecon Co.: | @3xInfantry[R]/Horses or M3 Scout Car, 0-1Xmmg[R]/Horses or M3 Scout Car |
| 3xEngineer Co.: | @3xEngineer |
| 2xArtillery Battalion: | @1xInfantry (HQ)/Horses, 2x76mm M42(3)/Limber |
| 1xArtillery Battalion: | @1xInfantry (HQ)/Horses, 2x122mm M38(3)/Limber |
| 1xAnti-Aircraft Co.: | @3x12.7mm AAMG |
| 3xAnti-tank Battery: | @1x76mm M42(2)/Limber |

Notes:

1. Whole Infantry battalions may be rearmed as SMG Infantry.
2. The Division may call on the assets of 1st Army.

1ST TANK CORPS

Tank Co.: 3xT-34/76F
 Rifle Co.: 3xInfantry/Truck, 1xMMG/Truck
 Motor Rifle Support Co.: 1x46mm ATG/Truck,
 1x76mm M27 IG(2)/Truck,
 1xSMG Infantry/Truck,
 1x82mm Mortar(3)/Truck
 Motorized Support Co.: 1x45mm ATG/Truck
 or 1x57mm ATG/M3 SC,
 1xSMG Infantry/Truck,
 2-3x82mm Mortar(1+)/Truck,
 0-1x76mm M27 IG(2),
 0-1x12.7mm AAMG/Truck
 Anti-Aircraft Battery: 1-2xM17 AA Halftrack
 or 1x37mm M39 AA/Truck
 or 3-4x12.7mm AAMG/Truck
 Tank Battalion: 1xT-34/76F (HQ), 2-3xTank Co.
 Motor Rifle Battalion: 1xInfantry (HQ)/Truck, 3xRifle Co.,
 1xMotor Rifle Support Co.
 Motorized Battalion: 1xInfantry (HQ)/Truck or Halftrack,
 3xRifle Co., 1xMotorized Support Co.
 Motor Rifle Support Grp: 4xEngineer (SMG)/Truck,
 3x82mm Mortar(1+)/Truck,
 2x12.7mm AAMG/Truck,
 3xInfantry[R]/Truck, 3x57mm ATG/Truck
 Tank Brigade: 1xT-34 (GHQ), 3xTank Battalion,
 1xMotor Rifle Battalion, 2xBa-64 AC[R],
 1xAnti-Aircraft Battery
 Motor Rifle Brigade: 1xInfantry (GHQ), 3xMotorized Battalion,
 Motor Rifle Support Group
 1st Tank Corps: 3xTank Brigade, 1xMotor Rifle Brigade

Corps Assets

1xAnti-Tank Regiment: 4xSu-85, 3xSMG Infantry
 1xAnti-Aircraft Regiment: 3x37mm M-39 AA/Truck
 1xMortar Regiment: 1xInfantry (HQ)/Truck,
 4-6x120mm Mortar(3)/Truck
 1xRocket Battalion: 1xInfantry (HQ)/Truck,
 2x132mm M-13 MRL(2)

Notes:

1. Infantry Stands may be replaced with Submachinegun Stands at your option.
2. T-34/76s might be replaced with T-34/85s beginning in 1945. Evidence for this practice is sketchy and uncertain.
3. Infantry may ride into action on the backs of tanks rather than in trucks, acting as "Tank Marines".
4. The Components of the 1st Tank Corps were designated as follows:
 - 1st Motor Rifle Brigade
 - 2nd Tank Brigade
 - 3rd Tank Brigade
 - 4th Tank Brigade
 - 1st Rocket Battalion
 - 24th Anti-Tank Regiment
 - 26th Anti-Aircraft Regiment

1ST POLISH ARMY ASSETS

4xHeavy Tank Rgt.: @4xJS-II
 1x SP Artillery Rgt. (25th): @4xJSU-122, 1xInfantry[R]/M3 Scout Car
 4xSP Artillery Rgt.: @4xSu-76
 1xTank Destroyer BN: @3xSu-57
 3xEngineer Co.: @3xEngineer
 3xPioneer Co.: @3xPioneer Infantry

Notes:

1. Polish 1st Army consisted of the following units:
 - 1st Infantry Division (Kosciuzko)
 - 2nd, 3rd, 4th, & 6th Infantry Division
 - 1st Independent Tank Brigade (Heroes of Westerplatte)
2. Polish 2nd Army consisted of the following units:
 - 5th, 7th, 8th, 9th, & 10th Infantry Division
 - 1st Tank Corps

1ST BYELORUSSIAN FRONT ASSETS

9xRocket BN: @1xInf. (HQ)/Truck, 2x132mm M13 MRL(2)
 3xMortar BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 6x120 M43 Mortar(3)/Limber or Truck
 3xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 4x76mm M42(3)/Limber or Truck
 2xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 4x122mm M38(3)/Limber or Truck
 1xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 4x152mm M43(3)/Limber or Truck
 2xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 4x122mm M31/37(3)/Limber or Truck
 1xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 4x152mm M37(3)/Limber or Truck
 3xArtillery BN: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horses or Truck,
 3x203mm M31(3)/Tractor or Truck
 1xRecon Co.: @3xT-34/76[R] or 3xT-70[R]
 2xRecon Co.: @3xInf.[R]/Motorcycles
 1xRecon Co.: @3xInf.[R]/Bren Carrier
 9xAA Battery: @1x37mm M39 AA/Limber or Truck
 3xAA Battery: @1x85mm M39 AA/Limber or Truck
 4xAA Company: @3x12.7mm AAMG/Horse or Truck
 3xAA Regiment: @1xSMG Inf. (HQ)/Horse or Truck,
 6xATG/Limber or Truck +
 6xAnti-Tank Gun/Limber or Truck

Notes:

1. Heavy Tank Regiments first became available in 1945.
2. The 25th SP Artillery Regiment first became available in 1945.
3. Anti-Tank Regiments may contain 45mm M42 ATGs, 57mm M43 ATGs, or 76mm M42(2).
4. 37mm AA Guns may be replaced with M17 Halftracks mounting 4x12.7mm AAMG (The Soviet equivalent of the US M16).
5. Pioneer stands function in all ways like Engineer stands, except they receive no special advantage making Close Assaults.

