

Chapter VI

General Offensive on the Russian Front

1. – The State of Polish Forces at the end of 1919

The organisational work which had gone on for months in the interior had borne fruit: with General Haller's army in the Motherland, there was only the Siberian Division missing,¹ this division being mixed up in the Russian Civil War in Siberia. The Great Poland army was, sooner or later, to be formally subordinated to the High Command. The first stage of the creation of the Polish Armed Forces was finished. In the middle of July the High Command disposed of, including both the interior and at the front, some well turned out troops – for the circumstances of the time – most being in ten large organic units.

In Little Poland there were the 4th, 5th and 10th IDs, the 3rd Legion Division and the 6th Chasseur Division, in total, five infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade.

In Volhynia there were the 1st Chasseur Division and the 5th CB.

In Polesia was the 9th ID.

On the Lithuanian-Belorussian front were the 1st and 2nd Legion Divisions, the 1st Lithuanian-Belorussian ID and the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Brigades.

In the interior were the 2nd, 3rd and 7th Chasseur Divisions and the 6th, 7th and 8th IDs, plus the three divisions of Great Poland, a total of ten infantry divisions.²

A grand total of 22 infantry divisions and 4 cavalry brigades, the organisation of the latter still not yet really fully completed. With these there remained at the front line some infantry units not in divisions and cavalry not in brigades, notably General Babianski's Group.

In the last four months of 1919 the definitive unification of the troops from the various sources would take place, at least from an organisational point of view. The formal signal for this was the service on 19 October in Kraków celebrating the unification of all the Polish military forces.

The divisions from the centre of Poland were numbered from 1 to 10:³ the last being General Żeligowski's, which had arrived almost complete from Odessa. There were, besides, two Lithuanian-Belorussian divisions (1st and 2nd).⁴

The Haller divisions were reorganised to the local structure, following the Polonisation of its officer corps and replacement of old soldiers not of Polish nationality or belonging to un-mobilised classes.⁵ They then formed three divisions, numbered 11 to 13, plus a portion was used to transform the previous mountain brigade into a division,⁶ and a portion formed the basis of a new division, the 18th. The Great Poland army provided three divisions, numbered 14, 15 and 17. The Pomeranian division, which was formed later, was number 16.

At the end of 1919, the united Polish army already had 21 infantry divisions and 7 cavalry brigades, with a strength at the front and the interior of about 600,000 men.

Comparison of this total with that of the winter of 1918-1919 shows vividly the work accomplished by Poland in the creation of its armed forces, in difficult circumstances, with the interior conditions just as unfavourable as the external problems.

Still, despite its unification and organisation on a uniform structure, the army was not homogenous, in the sense that the different origins of its parts led to profound differences in the principles and methods of training and combat. Two systems were considered for the army – the German and the French schools. It was at this time that it was decided to adopt French tactics and methods. A French mission started instructing the superior officers and subalterns, as well as the officers of the General Staff.

2. – Offensive Operations in July and August 1919

At the same time that the threat of war against German dissipated, the nine months of effort in eastern Little Poland was capped off with the success of putting the Galician Ukrainian army completely out of action. This left the Dnieper Ukrainian army, which could not really be considered as a true adversary due to its tendency to seek an accord. The time had therefore come for serious offensive operations on the Russian front.

¹ In fact, most of this division never did make it to Poland – only one brigade arrived, in mid 1920.

² Yes, I know it does not add up! Some of the other totals in the following paragraphs are a bit "unreliable" too.

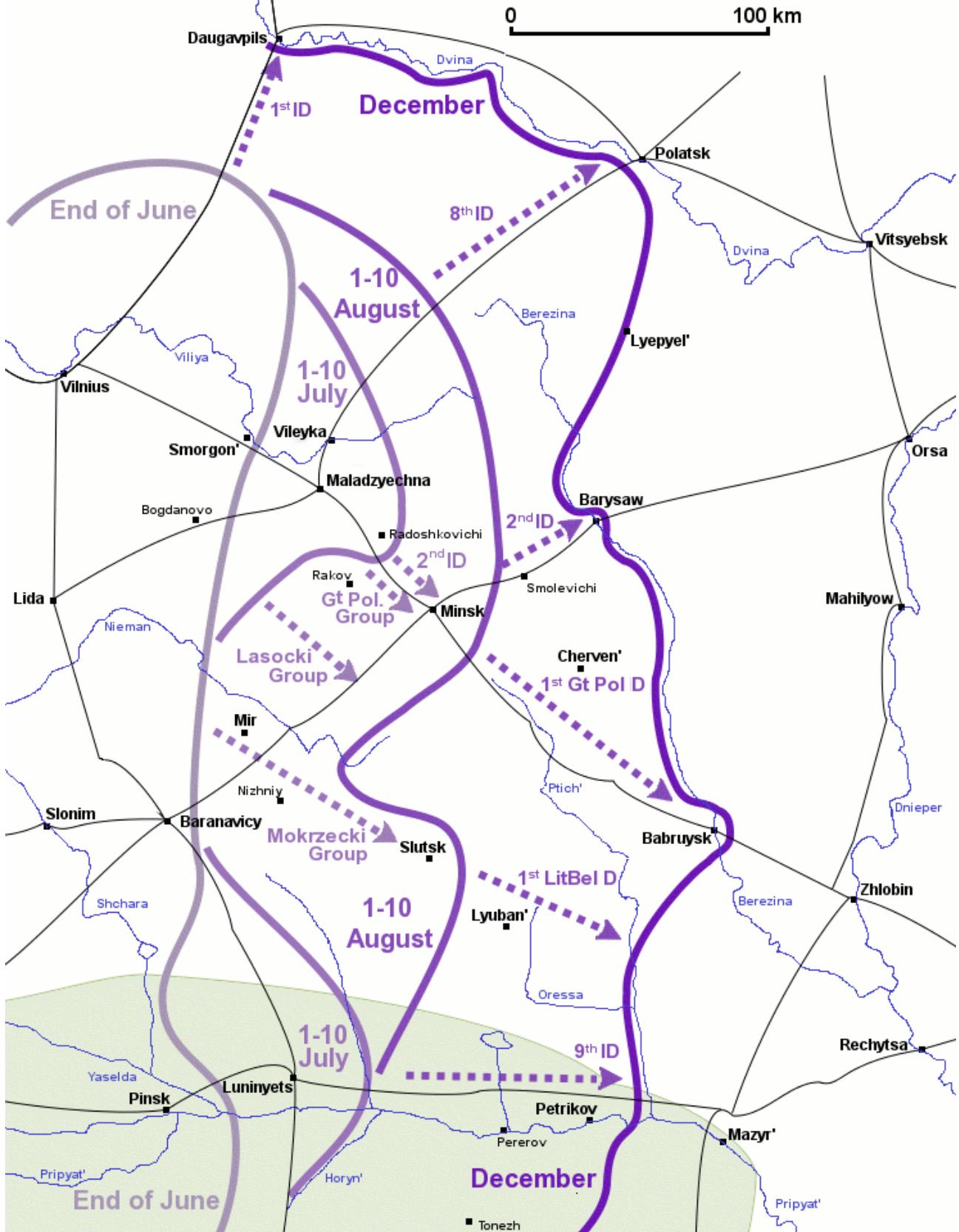
³ The Legion Divisions were given numbers 1 to 3 and from this point I shall drop the "Legion" nomenclature, though Przybylski retains it. I believe divisions 4 to 6 were raised from Galician areas, and therefore were largely ex-Austrian, whereas 7 to 10 were formed around ex-Russian units.

⁴ Sometimes called the 19th and 20th.

⁵ i.e. too old or too young to have been called up.

⁶ I think this was sometimes called the 21st.

Offensive on the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front



Political and strategic considerations favoured launching these operations as soon as possible. The aim of the war, that is to say throwing Russia eastwards and the creation of a *fait accompli* concerning the rights of Poland to the portion of the territories occupied by the Soviet armies, had not yet been attained. Strategic considerations demanded the occupation of the major rail line that ran Polatsk–Maladzyechna –Minsk–Baranavičy–Luninyets–Sarny–Rivne–L'viv, and the repulse of the enemy's base of operations to the line Orša–Zhlobin–Mazyr'–Korosten'.

Preparatory work on the plan for the Polish-Russian campaign started at GHQ in June. By the first weeks of July it had been finished. The action was to start with an offensive in Volhynia and Polesia, with the aim of taking the Luninyets–Rivne line. The occupation of this line would allow liaison between the fronts north and south of Polesia and align the Volhynian and Galician fronts, the latter having previously pushed further east. With this operation terminated, or at least started, the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front would, in its turn, press forward.

In the event though the operations of the last front started before the operations in Volhynia.

As explained above, the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front had remained on the defensive during the whole of May and June, as a result of the tasks imposed on it with respect to watching the Germans. But once there was no longer any need to occupy itself with that enemy the commander of the front, General Szeptycki, on his own initiative executed an attack on Maladzyechna. This occupation presenting the advantage of depriving the Russians of this rail hub and gave an excellent base for eventual offensive operations in the directions of Lida and Vilnius.

The principal attack on Maladzyechna, leaving from the Bogdanovo area, was directed by General Szeptycki at the head of the 2nd ID. A weaker group drawn from the 1st ID, in the Smorgon area, attacked towards Vileyka at the same time. The cavalry operated on the right wing of the 2nd ID – it was to cut off the enemy troops which were defending Maladzyechna from their line of retreat towards Minsk. On 1 July Vileyka was occupied, and on 4 July Maladzyechna. It is true that the enemy succeeded in avoiding the encirclement, but it was obliged to beat a retreat in different directions, some to Polatsk and some to Minsk. Thus a hole was created in the Russian front, and the Polish troops found themselves in a good position to continue their envelopment of Minsk. Still, General Szeptycki's forces were too weak to seize this last city.

The Russians, worried for the safety of Minsk, soon passed over to the counter-attack, with the aim of recovering Maladzyechna. It was directed into the gap between the 2nd ID and the neighbouring group of General Lasocki, which was at that time fighting to hold the eastern opening of the Naliboki forest. The Soviets tried to outflank the right wing of the 2nd ID near Rakov. However the hole was closed in time, thanks to units drawn from the Polish-Lithuanian demarcation line and thanks to General Lasocki's Group, which was forced as a consequence to move northwards. The enemy's progress was thus stopped in time.

The combats around Maladzyechna encouraged the High Command to reinforce General Szeptycki without waiting for the development of the Volhynian operation, contrary to the original overall plan.

At the beginning of August a new Polish effort was launched on the front, from Radoshkovichi to Baranavičy, with the aim of enveloping the two wings of the Russians defending the Minsk area. The principal attack was made on the left flank along the Maladzyechna–Minsk rail line by the 2nd ID and the Great Poland Group. It was supported by a regiment of cavalry which tried to cut the Minsk–Barysaw rail line at Smolevichi. The right flank was made up of General Mokrzecki's group, which attacked from Baranavičy towards Mir–Nesvizh, then Slutsk. These two flanking groups were linked by General Lasocki's group, which attacked perpendicularly to the Baranavičy–Minsk rail line, towards Dzyarzhynsk. Besides this, an attack was made on Slutsk from the south by a detachment composed mostly of cavalry and drawn from the group operating in Polesia.

Despite the resistance put up by the enemy over the whole of the attacked area, the Polish troops achieved their objectives. On 8 August, after having broken enemy resistance at Zaslavl' and then on the edge of the city, the left flank entered Minsk. Shortly before, on the 6th, the cavalry detachment had occupied Slutsk.

After taking Minsk the Poles continued their advance as planned: the 2nd ID occupied, after a forced march, the line of the Berezina and the Barysaw bridgehead. The Great Poland Group broke the resistance of a rear guard in the Cherven' region and also reached the Berezina: on 29 August it occupied the Babruysk fortress. Further south, the 1st Lithuanian-Belorussian Division (the groups of Generals Lasocki and Mokrzecki) also approached the Berezina with its left, while the right inclined towards the west, so as to maintain liaison with the 9th ID in Polesia.

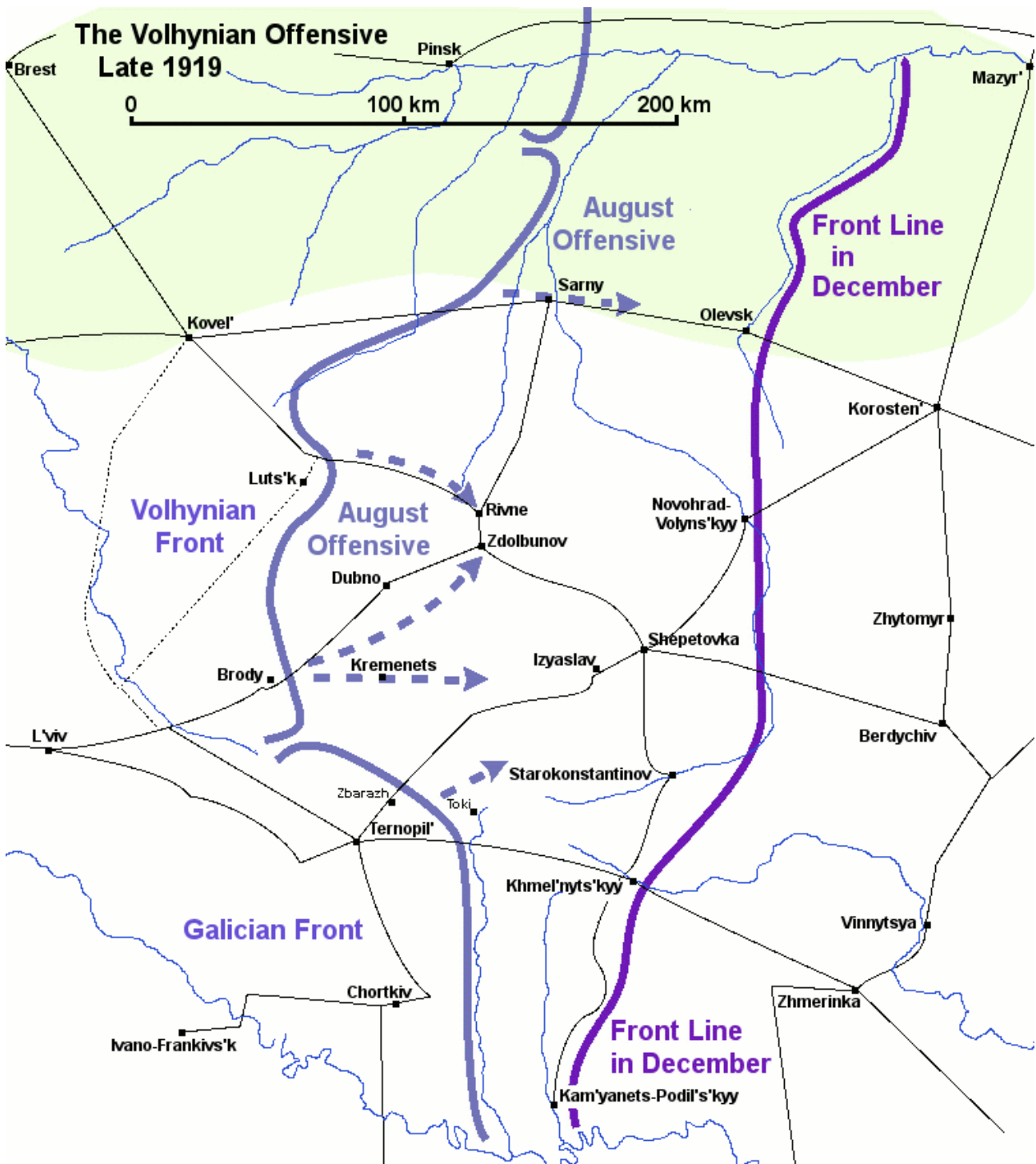
Soon the [northern] wing of the front also started to move forward: the 8th ID and the 1st ID had the Dvina as their objective: the first marched on Polatsk and the second on Daugavpils.

In Polesia the front also moved considerably eastwards in the same way. Almost at the same time as the action on Maladzyechna, General Listowski's group set out to attack Luninyets, which was occupied on 7 July. After a short stop on the line of the upper Horyn' and Lan', the Polesian troops advanced once more until, at the end of August, they had reached the line Lyuban'–Ozero Chervonoye–the Utvocha (to the north of the Pripet)–Pererov–Tonezh (to the south). During this time the group had General Sikorski appointed as its commander, succeeding General Listowski, and became the 9th ID, attached to the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front and consequently subordinated to General Szeptycki.

The start of the Volhynian offensive was preceded by a general regrouping of forces, for Volhynia and Little Poland. The previous group under General Iwaszkiewicz, called the Galician-Volhynian Front and composed of the whole sector south of the Pripyat', was divided into two independent fronts – the Galician, under General Iwaszkiewicz, and the Volhynian, under General Listowski.

The Galician Front was composed of the 10th ID, the 3rd Legion Division, the 3rd Chasseur Division (recently arrived

from the interior), the 6th Chasseur Division, the 5th ID, the Great Poland Group and the 3rd CB. The Volhynian Front was made up of the 4th ID (sent from Berestechko in Galicia), the 1st Chasseur Division, General Zygodlowicz's group and the 5th CB.



The offensive was launched on 8 August. The 4th ID, heading from around Brody, sent some of its forces to attack Dubno and the rest towards Kremenets – these two points were reached on 9 August. The 1st Chasseurs in turn marched from Luts'k towards Rivne. After breaking the first resistance in front of Klevan' it engaged Rivne's line of forts, occupying that place during the night of 12/13 August. Continuing the attack these two divisions, aided by the 5th CB, reached the line Berėzno–the Sluch–Tuchin–the Horyn'–Ostrog by 16 August. At the same time, in the northern sector of the Volhynian front, General Zygodlowicz occupied Sarny and reached the line upper Sluch–Klesov–Berėzno. Co-operating with the Volhynian Front, the Galician one pushed on its left flank the 3rd Chasseur Division, the bulk of its forces, on the line Zbarazh–Izyaslav, towards the line Ostrog–Lachowa–Toki. The cavalry, the 3rd CB of the Galician Front and the 4th CB, formed from cavalry units of General Zygodlowicz's group, moved in front of the lines – the first occupying Shepetovka and Izyaslav, and the second Rokitnoye, on the Sarny–Korosten line.

3. – Stabilisation of the Front over Winter 1919-1920

The commander-in-chief now fixed a line which the victorious advance of the Poles to the east was not to cross. This ran: the Dvina up to Ulla—the Ulla up to Lyepyel'—the Berezina Canal—the Berezina up to Babruysk—the middle course of the Ptich'—the lower course of the Oressa—the Stviga—the Sluch to Berėzno—the Horyn' between Tuchin and Ostrog—Teofipol'—the Zbruch.

This line as defined left the fronts of Polesia, Volhynia and Little Poland quite a way forward of the Lithuanian and Belorussian ones. The reason for this was the events in the enemy camp then occurring to the east.

The first sign of these changes was during August in front of the Zbruch and the southern half of Volhynia, in the Rivne region, when the Russian troops there were replaced by Petliura's Ukrainian soldiers (of the Dnieper Ukraine). These troops, previously squeezed into the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyy area, had succeeded in putting themselves into order and had been reinforced to the point of being able to turn onto the attack against the Soviets. Their operations headed in two directions, towards Korosten and Berdychiv, and soon led to an occupation in front of the Poles at Shepetovka, then Novohrad Volyn's'kyy. In this situation any operation by the Poles on the Galician and southern portion of the Volhynian fronts would have taken Petliura's troops in the flank and rear.

But, at that time, such operations were not intended by the commander-in-chief. He saw the Ukraine, which desired independence from Russia, as a natural ally for Poland, and had in the middle of July reacted favourably to the proposition from the Ukrainian commander that an accord should be reached. The first stage was a Polish-Ukrainian armistice, signed on 1 September. By virtue of this convention, the Polish-Ukrainian demarcation line was fixed in its general provisions along the Zbruch, by Bazalia and Korets. Besides this, with the aim of avoiding later misunderstandings in the case of parallel action by Polish and Ukrainian troops against the Russians, it was arranged to limit the zone of operations by a line traced Korets—Olevsk—Mazyr'.

From this point on the Polish troops at the Galician and southern Volhynian Fronts found themselves automatically outside the theatre of active operations. The real right wing of the Polish eastern front was thus now the left wing of the Volhynian Front, linking with Petliura's Ukrainian army, which was *de facto* neutral.

It was other events, arising almost from the moment when the operations on the Zbruch and Rivne ceased, which caused the commander-in-chief to halt movement in northern Volhynia and Polesia. The general situation in the Ukraine was changing like a kaleidoscope. Coming up from the south of Russia, Denikin's counter-revolutionary army conducted a victorious march for many months, pushing back the Soviet troops to the north. After seizing Kiev at the start of September, the Whites threatened the Soviet soldiers operating in the Homel'—Mazyr' area.

Denikin's politics did not inspire confidence. His catchword of restoring a great independent Russia was menacing for the development of the reborn Polish state. Denikin saw some advantages that accrued to him from a strategic viewpoint in the war between Poland and Soviet Russia, but despite that would not recognise the goals which Poland aspired to in that struggle. Denikin thought that the Polish operations against the Soviets were justified only in the sense that the advance of the Polish troops east of the Bug acted to remove Bolshevik hands off supposedly Russian lands, to the advantage of the "great, indivisible Russia" whose representative he considered himself to be. Given this situation any aid given, even indirectly, to Denikin in those operations undertaken by him at this time on the west bank of the Dnieper, would not serve any purpose to Poland, above all when he directed a portion of his forces against Petliura's Ukrainian troops. The Polish front line in Polesia and northern Volhynia was definitively stopped at the end of September, on the line of the Ptich' and the Ubort'.

On the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front General Rydz-Smigly's group, reinforced by the 3rd ID taken from the Galician front, reached the Dvina in the last days of August. At Daugavpils there were four weeks of fighting, which ended with the Russian troops being pushed north of the river. To the northeast the 8th ID commenced with occupying the Auta, and at the end of September, after a bitter struggle, reached the Dvina at Polatsk. South of this town the front stabilised on the line Usvitsa—Kamen'—Lyepyel'—Berezina Canal. The end of the period of manoeuvre and combat on the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front was marked by an attempt by the Russians to break our line between the Dvina and the Berezina in the middle of October. The Russian attack indeed forced the 8th ID to retire onto the Auta. Several days later the front's reserves, namely the 1st and 3rd IDs and 1st Lithuanian-Belorussian Division, were called in haste to the threatened sector, allowing a return to the offensive and the recovery of all the positions previously occupied. From then on the combat activity on the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front slowly declined, becoming mere small local actions. The disposition of forces at the start of November were in general as follows:

The Dvina sector up to Druya, inclusive, were held by General Rydz-Smigly's group, consisting of the 1st and 3rd IDs and the 1st CB. The 3rd ID was the only one in the line, the rest being in reserve in the Dokštas—Švenčionys area. Further along the Dvina, from Druya to Polatsk and then along to Lyepyel' and the Berezina was General Lasocki's group, which is to say the 8th ID and 1st Lithuanian-Belorussian Division.

The line of the Berezina was occupied by General Żeligowski's group. The 2nd ID was in the Barysaw sector, the 1st Great Polish Division in the Babruysk sector, and the 2nd CB on the upper Ptich'.

The right flank of the front, along the lower Ptich', the Pripyat' and the Ubort', up to about Ovruch, was held by

the 9th ID.

The front's reserve was the 10th ID, pulled back from Little Poland, the 6th ID, sent from the interior to the Vilnius area, and the 2nd Lithuanian-Belorussian Division, at Grodno. General Zygodlowicz commanded the whole of this group.

The Zygodlowicz group and Rydz-Smigly's non-engaged units acted as more than the reserve for the Russian front – they had other missions as well. Firstly, they formed cover and a sort of guard to the west, an indispensable precaution thanks to the relationship between the Polish and Lithuanian states at this time and the events that were then happening in Lithuanian and Latvian territory.

The position of the Lithuanians with regard to Poland were set from the start by the pretensions raised by Lithuania regarding Vilnius.¹ Already, from the start of January 1919, while local volunteer Polish organisations attempted to stop the occupation of Vilnius by Soviet troops after it was evacuated by the Germans, the political men of Lithuania, without even trying to defend Vilnius against the invasion menacing it, raised an official protest against the plans and efforts of the Poles.

Likewise it was renewed when, in April 1919, Polish troops took Vilnius from the hands of the Russians. Despite the efforts of the Polish High Command, all attempts at establishing a friendly reciprocal relationship between the two states failed; they ran into the intransigent pretensions of the Lithuanians, such as the idea that the Polish troops operating in the Vilnius area against the Russians should be tactically subordinated to the Lithuanian High Command, a pretension formulated while the *de facto* Lithuanian state was still under the domination of German troops of occupation, and where the state of war between Lithuania and the Soviets was purely theoretical. The simple determination, for military ends, of a provisional line of demarcation, raised great difficulties.² So during the first months of contact between Polish and Lithuanian troops there were several encounters, more or less serious, and when the Poles attacked Daugavpils the Lithuanian troops permitted active interventions in the rear of the Polish combatants. Only the stabilisation of the Polish front on the Dvina allowed, by way of agreements between local commanders, the determination of a line of demarcation. Nevertheless the reciprocal arrangements were not made in a manner that truly allowed the Polish command full liberty of movement against the Russian troops in the northern theatre.

Independently of Poland's relations with Lithuania, insufficiently cleared up, a serious danger started from the beginning of 1919 to appear for Poland – a danger also coming from Lithuania, where the Germans were engaged in questionable activities.³ Obligated by the treaty of Versailles to withdraw their troops from the Baltic States, the Germans left some volunteer units there, supposedly independent of the German government. Also formed soon afterwards, with the co-operation of the Germans, was Bermond-Avalov's army, composed of Russians formerly held POW by the Germans. This army claimed to have been formed to fight against the Soviet Russians, but in fact it was used as a tool of German politics in Lithuania and Latvia. The danger from this quarter grew particularly grave at the start of October when, without warning, the Bermond-Avalov army attacked the Latvian troops at Riga with a portion of its forces, while others marched on Daugavpils – and hence onto the flank and rear of the Polish front on the Dvina. This situation was only cleared by the energetic intervention of the Allied Powers and their associates, forcing the Germans to retire their troops from Lithuania in November. These troops were followed by the Bermond-Avalov army, which retired after suffering a disaster in its battle with the Latvian army.

If the month of November saw the complete stabilisation on the Lithuanian-Belorussian Front, on the contrary the months of October and November saw major changes in Volhynia and Podolia. Denikin was not satisfied to concentrate on fighting the Soviets, but also fought energetically against an independent Ukraine. Petliura's Ukrainians succumbed in this struggle, the remnants being thrown onto the Polish front lines, and Denikin's troops arrived at the Luninyets-Khmel'nyts'kyy rail line. Following this, the Polish High Command pushed leading elements of the Galician Front to the line of the *Smotryczanka* and the Smotrych and those of the Volhynian Front onto the Sluch' and to occupy Novohrad Volyns'kyy. At the end of November the Poles found themselves in immediate contact with Denikin.

During the last days of December there were new changes. This was the end of success for Denikin's army. Under the pressure of a Soviet counter-offensive, it started to retire, which led to Soviet troops little by little making their appearance along the length of the Galician Front. Pre-empting their approach, the Polish command once more pushed the Galician Front a bit further east, to the line of the Ushytsa, and from Khmel'nyts'kyy to Starokonstantynów, and thus aligned it with the right flank of the Volhynian Front on the Sluch'.

After a series of oscillations and repositionings, the situation of the two fronts stabilised as follows: to the south, in

¹ This section is particularly biased, with a number of unnecessary slurs on the Lithuanians. For example, the Lithuanian "pretensions" to Vilnius were based on such minor matters as it being a traditional capital of Lithuania and the centre of a Lithuanian ethnic area. For a full look at the issues see Alfred Senn's *The Great Powers, Lithuania and the Vilna Question, 1920–1928*.

² Having noted previously that possession was everything when it came to the post war setting of borders, he somehow manages to forget that here. In this case, if the suggested demarcation line had left Vilnius in Lithuanian hands there would have been no problems. Basically, all of the Lithuanian-Polish problems were caused by the intransigence of both sides over that city.

³ This paragraph also contains quite a few large errors of fact, though admittedly none of them are particularly important from a Polish point of view. What matters is that there was a sizeable German-controlled force in Lithuania and Latvia until the end of 1919, which was a potentially serious threat to the Polish forces operating in the north.

Podolia, General Bonnin's group, then the 18th ID. Spanning the Ternopil'–Khmel'nyts'kyy rail line was the 12th ID, with the 5th ID behind it as the front's reserve.

On the Volhynian Front: the 13th ID, the 3rd and 4th CBs in the Shepetovka–Novohrad Volyns'kyy area, and further on the 4th ID reaching up to Olevsk.

The 1919 campaign was over. After many months of combat and exertion, the Polish soldiers had established themselves to the east, on distant frontiers, and thus covered the heart of Poland, which was beating stronger and stronger. The aim set out in November 1918 by the Commander-in-Chief and the Head of State was very largely reached.

The *fait accompli* had largely headed off the decisions of the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers and their associates, which on 2 December 1919 had fixed the provisional eastern border of Poland as starting from the former Austro-Russian border along the upper and middle Bug and further north in the general direction of Grodno.¹

The whole front went into winter quarters. Operations of a large scale ceased, with the two parties placing themselves on the defensive.

The only exception was in January 1920, in the extreme north, in front of the flank of the front, where a short campaign in concert with the Latvian army was carried out.

Our progress in Lithuania and Belorussia in the summer and autumn of 1919 was accompanied by a diplomatic campaign with the aim of concluding a military convention with Latvia. At the end of December one came, under the terms of which Poland would engage to actively support Latvia in its struggle with the Soviets. It was a new step for Poland in its aim to exert political power in the east. This accord also gave immediate strategic advantages – a shortening of the front by removing the long sector along the Dvina and support of the army's left wing from the Latvian republic.

The 1st and 3rd IDs took part on the Polish side, under the command of General Rydz-Smigly, who was placed in charge of the entire Polish-Latvian operation. On 3 January the Poles attacked Daugavpils from the south, while the Latvians attacked from the north. The thick ice on the Dvina assisted in the crossing of this serious obstacle. After a short combat Daugavpils fell into Polish hands. A part of the 1st ID, launched to turn Daugavpils to the north, held out their hands to the Latvian troops coming from the west and north, while at the same time near Višķi they fought off the Russians arriving to assist the city's garrison. During January, despite the extreme weather conditions with the cold reaching 25 degrees, the Poles and Latvians moved on to Lake Drissa, Osveya and the Siniucha. The Poles were progressively relieved on this line by the Latvians and, after being withdrawn from the front, were assembled in the Daugavpils area.

¹ It should be noted that this is very close to the modern border.