

## PAPER DETAILS

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## **POLES IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR BY THE EXAMPLE OF THE AUSTRIAN EMPIRE'S ARMY**

**Marta GRABOWSKA\***

### **ÖZ**

Makale, I. Dünya Savaşı'ndan önce Polonya bölgelerinin politik durumu ve I. Dünya Savaşı esnasında Rus işgaline karşı Galiçya'da Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun üstlendiği rol üzerine odaklanmıştır ve Galiçya'nın coğrafi bölgelerinin tanımlanması açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. I. Dünya Savaşı esnasında Galiçya'nın Tarihi, doğu cephesinin genel tarihi temelleri üzerine oturtulmuştur. O zaman ki Galiçya'nın durumu hakkında İtalyanın Cephesi'nin tesiri üzerinde durulmuştur. Polonya'nın parçalanmasının bir sonucu olarak Galiçya Avusturya İmparatorluğu'nun bir parçası olacaktır. Makale, I. Dünya Savaşı'nda Avusturya-Macaristan'ın durumunu ve Polonyalıların askeri faaliyetlere katılımını vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** I. Dünya Savaşı, Galiçya, 3 Mayıs 1791 Polonya Anayasası, Doğu Cephesi, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Polonya.

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on the role of the Ottoman Empire's support of Galicia against the Russian's invasion during World War I. The political situation of the Polish territories before the World War I, a great Polish political achievement from before it's partitions i.e. the Constitution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1791 and the geographic location of Galicia are described. The history of Galicia during World War I is drawn on the bases of the general history of the Eastern front and the impact of the Italian front on the Galicia's situation at that time is clarified. As Galicia became a part of the Austrian Empire as a result of partitions of Poland, the paper emphasizes on the situation of the

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Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I and on Poles taking part in its military actions. The role of Galicia and Polish Legions formed there in achieving an independency of the whole country in 1918 is underlined.

**Keywords:** World War I, Galicia, the Polish Constitution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1971, Eastern front of World War I, Italian front of World War I, the Ottoman Empire's support for Galicia during World War I, Poles in the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I.

### **PARTITIONS OF POLAND, THE POLISH CONSTITUTION OF THE 3<sup>RD</sup> OF MAY 1971 AND GALICIA**

When the World War I began Poland didn't exist as a sovereign country. Three subsequent partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (created in 1569<sup>1</sup>) in the years 1772, 1793 and 1795 by three neighbor superpowers: Russia, Prussia and the Austrian Empire<sup>2</sup> were a result of the weakness of the country which had been unable to complete the military reforms despite its relatively strong economy. Before this tragedies Poland did something unusual. The Polish assembly of Nobles proclaimed the Constitution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1791<sup>3</sup> – the first written democratic Constitution in Europe which became a pattern and a precursor of changes of political systems in many European countries after World War I. But this was perceived as a danger by three surrounding absolute monarchies. They fastened partitions of the country still weak militarily where a liberal and democratic tendencies grew up since 1505 when the Polish Nobles transferred the legislative power from the king to the Nobles creating so called “Nobles Democracy” and where the first **elected** king as early as 1573 - Henry III from the French House of Valois was crowned. This democratic reforms in the country surrounded by three absolute monarchies were regarded as a source of unwanted political tendencies which could influence theirs countries, too.

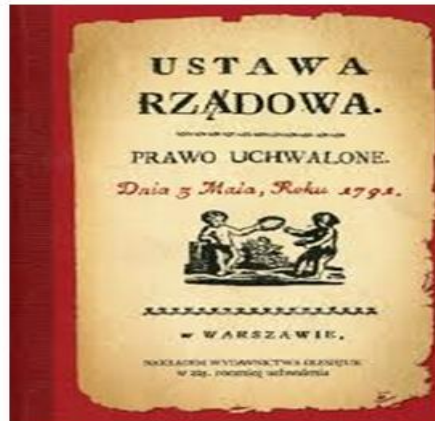
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<sup>1</sup> Jučas, Mečislovas; Firewicz, Andrzej: *Unia polsko-litewska*. Toruń: Europejskie Centrum Edukacyjne cop., 2004

<sup>2</sup> Lukowski, Jerzy: *The partitions of Poland: 1772,1793,1795*. London; New York, NY: Longman, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Bardach, Juliusz: *Konstytucja 3 Maja a unia polsko-litewska*. Warszawa,,: PWN 1991; *Ustawa rządowa: prawo uchwalone dnia 3 maja, roku 1791*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Związków Zawodowych, 1981

## Konstytucja 3 maja 1791 r.



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Konstytucja\\_3\\_maja\\_1791\\_r.\\_tytułowa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Konstytucja_3_maja_1791_r._tytułowa.jpg)

The territory which had been overtaken by the Austrian Empire named Galicia (pol. **Galicja**) was located in the Southern Poland with such cities like Kraków, Lwów, Przemyśl, Rzeszów, Stanisławów, Tarnów, Tarnopol and Nowy Sącz. The Austrian Empire overtook near 130.000 sq. km i.e. 11% of the Polish territory with about 4,2 mil. citizens, Russia 82% and Prussia 7%. People leaving on this territories become subjects respectively of the Austrian emperor, the tsar of Russia and of the emperor and king (in one person) of Prussia.

## Partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia and Austria 1772-1795 (Galicja – marked by light and dark yellow colour on the map)



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_the\\_Partitions\\_of\\_Poland\\_1772-1795.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Partitions_of_Poland_1772-1795.jpg)

Poles remember with a deep gratitude that the only country which has never accepted partitions of Poland was the Ottoman Empire. When a Polish representative was missing during official diplomatic meetings on the Ottoman Court of that time,

there had always been a message publicly announced that “a Deputy from Lehistan (Poland) hasn’t come yet”.

### **A- REASONS OF WORLD WAR I AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION ON EAST PRUSSIA (TANNENBERG)**

There were various reasons why World War I began<sup>4</sup>: the expiration of the *Holy Alliance* and the *Alliance of Three Emperors* inspired by Otto von Bismarck, growing imperialism of Great Britain, France and Germany and the problem of colonies, situation in the Ottoman Empire as well as movements towards independence of many ethnic groups (including Slavs) living on territories of absolute monarchies of that time. The new agreement known as *Entente Cordiale* created the alliance of Great Britain, France and Russia (*Entente*). On the other hand Germany, the Austrian Empire and Italy proclaimed the *Triple Alliance*. The attempt of 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1914 r. on the prince France Ferdinand, the successor of the Austrian Empire throne, caused so called “domino effect” and the war spread out over the Continent and the rest of the world. In fact, a war was already expected, especially by Germany where so called *The Schlieffen’s Plan* had already existed. And although, despite its content, the German Field Marshal, Paul von Hindenburg<sup>5</sup> had to fight against the Russian invasion on the Eastern front at the very beginning of the War - much earlier than it had been expected (as France insisted on its alliance – Russia - to weaken Germany from the East) – his spectacular victory by Tannenberg<sup>6</sup> nearby Allenstein, East Prussia (**Olsztyn** at present) over the General Alexander Samsonov’s Russian Army in August 1914 (who committed a suicide after the failure) had shown the tactic capabilities and power of the German Army of that time. Other famous German winners of these fights were Erich Ludendorff and General Otto von Below.

World War I or the Great War as it is called, lasted more than 4 years till 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, was very bloody with more than 65 mil. people taking part in it and near 10 mil. of casualties. It was also the first time that technology was widely applied


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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, Richard F.; Herwig, Holger H.: *The Origins of World War I*. Cambridge University Press, 2008; Pajewski, Janusz: *Pierwsza wojna światowa 1914-1918*. Wyd. 3. Warszawa: Wydaw. Naukowe PWN, 2005.



<sup>5</sup> Berman, Russell A.: *Paul von Hindenburg*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Schafer, Tcheobald von: *Tannenberg*. Wolfenbüttel: Melchior-Verl., 2006; Stone, David R.: *The Russian Army in the Great War: the Eastern Front, 1914-1918*. [eBook] Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015

# Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934)



## The Tannenberg Memorial



Source:

Poles living on the territories of the three empires of that time were subjects of incorporation to all three armies and near 3 mil. Poles had to fight on various fronts against their will and very often against each other. Before the World War I Poles living in Galicia being under the Austro-Hungarian administration which was the most liberal of the three, could move freely from one place to another. This movement was frequent especially amongst “inteligencja” between Kraków, Lwów and Vienna. This were places where the intellectual life flourished and Poles were its important part. Galicia was operating on the bases of some sort of autonomy and suffered much less oppression than the other parts of the country.

time. Thus, from the point of view of the military service he had qualifications to serve as an officer of the special Austrian troops trained to fight in difficult mountain and winter conditions. Since 1907 he was an employee of one of the Austrian Ministry and was practicing simultaneously as a journalist. After completing the Military School he was incorporated to the 80<sup>th</sup> regiment of the Austrian Army (*Galizisches Infanterieregiment Nr. 80*). The regiment had a long tradition, was created in 1860 and it was so called *Linieninfanterieregiment* by the name of *Wilhelm Ernst Großherzog v. Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, Herzog zu Sachsen* of which 25% soldiers were Poles. When the World War I began he was sent to the Italian front.

### **C- ITALY IN WORLD WAR I**

Italy primarily was a member of the *Triple Alliance* (with Germany and the Austrian Empire). But when World War I began Italy withdrew from this alliance, proclaimed neutrality and claiming its rights to Trident with majority of Italians living there under the Austrian administration - on 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1915 joined *Entente* (Great Britain, Russia and France) and attacked the Austrian Empire from the South on unusually difficult area of Alps by Isonzo River. The valley of Isonzo River and the town Gorizia (in Slovenia at present) were the only ways to pass the Alps, that's why this area was attacked from both sides. There were 12 battles between 1915-1918, of which some even on the highs of 3000 m. or in tunnels bored by blowing up rocks. The fights took place also nearby Monfalcone and Ampezzo (renamed Cortina d'Ampezzo after the War). All this places were mutually once in the Austrian and once in the Italian hands.



## **The Italian front 1915-1918** (12 battles 23 May 1915 – 3 November 1918)



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italy\\_1915-1918.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italy_1915-1918.jpg)

## **The Italian front**

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italian\\_soldiers\\_in\\_the\\_Italian\\_front.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italian_soldiers_in_the_Italian_front.jpg)



Seeing subsequent eleven battles unresolved because amongst the others for Poles for example as well as for other Slaves serving in the Austro-Hungarian Army, Italy has never been a natural enemy, Germany decided to help its Austrian alliance. In August 1917 mentioned above German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg decided to send experts to Italian front to find a proper area to use a poison gas against Italian



Army. They designated the Caporetto site. General Otto von Below withdrawn from the Eastern front formed a new 14<sup>th</sup> Army to put the plan into practice.

#### **D- THE BATTLE OF CAPORETTO**

The Battle of Caporetto<sup>7</sup> is known as the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo River<sup>8</sup>. It took place between 24<sup>th</sup> of October to 19<sup>th</sup> of November 1917. The poison gas **diphosgene with chlorine-arsenic** was used by Germans followed by thousands of machine guns fire and mines detonations. Italians, with gas masks working no longer than 2 hours backed in panic. This battle is known as “the greatest defeat in the Italian history”.<sup>9</sup> Italians lost 10.000 killed, 39.000 wounded, 265.000 prisoners of war and left a lot of theirs military equipment on the battle field. However, similar as it was by Ypres on the Western front – victims of the poison gas used on the open air were not only on the enemies side but also among Austro-Hungarian soldiers including my Grandfather. Withdrawn from the battle field he was classified as a casualty and the message about his death was sent to the family in Vienna. Incidentally, a horrifying “innovation” applied by Germans during World War II in using a poison gas let to closed gas chambers of concentration camps like in Auschwitz for example, where groups of victims were selected “more precisely” and the “efficiency” of a gas (this time usually cyclone B) was much higher than on the open air...!

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<sup>7</sup> Barbero Alessandro: *Caporetto*. Bari: Laterza, 2017

<sup>8</sup> Macdonald, John; Željko, Climprić: *Caporetto and the Isonzo campaign: the Italian front 1915-1918*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword: Military, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Labanca, Nicola: *Caporetto: storia di una disfatta*. Firenze: Giunti, Casterman, 2000

*24 October – 7 November 1917*



It is worth to point out that there were many famous Poles in the Austro-Hungarian Army who fought on the Italian front. Amongst the others Stanisław Maczek<sup>10</sup> for example – known later on from World War II as a commander of the Polish Armoured Division of the Polish Armed Forces in the West. His division took part in the liberation of France (Falaise) and then in liberation of Netherlands (Breda) from the Nazi occupation. On the German side young Ervin Rommel for example – a junior officer at that time - took part in the Caporetto Battle.<sup>11</sup> He was known later on from World War II, the North African Campaign and Battle of El Alamein, also from *Operation Valkyrie* against Adolf Hitler what caused his tragic suicide in 1944. Many of those who were fighting on Italian front of World War I met afterwards during World War II as mature officers on various fronts and within various armies and alliances.

<sup>10</sup> Potomski, Piotr: *General broni Stanisław Władysław Maczek (1892-1994)* Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, cop. 2008

<sup>11</sup> Wilks, Eileen: *Rommel and Caporetto*. Readhowyouwant: Com Ltd, 2014

## Stanisław Maczek (1892-1994)

## Austro-Hungarian Army



# Ervin Rommel (1891-1944)

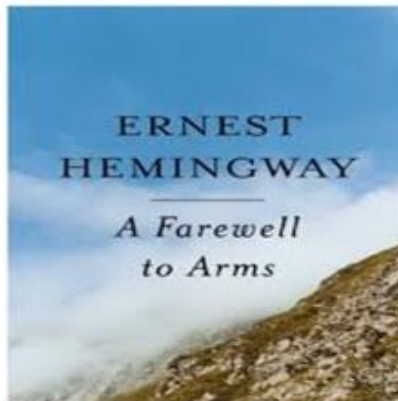


Zdroj obrázku: <http://volterra.nl/public/products-images/3613/main/1140026564.jpg>

It is also worth to mention that the Italian front was described by Ernest Hemingway in his famous novel *A Farewell to Arms*.<sup>12</sup> As a young American journalist Hemingway wanted to experience a war. He responded to a Red Cross recruitment, arrived at the Italian front and signed on to be an ambulance driver. He was collecting victims from the battle field. The novel was written on the bases of his experience there.

<sup>12</sup> Hemingway, Ernest: *A Farewell to Arms*. Paw Prints, 2008

**Ernest  
Hemingway**  
(1899-1961)



Book cover: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000APR010>  
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## **E- THE RUSSIAN INVASION ON GALICIA AND THE ROLE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE'S ARMY IN ITS DEFENSE**

Meanwhile, however, despite the Russian Army on the Eastern front was backed from the German territory in 1914 – soon the conflict between Russia and the Austrian Empire raised and the Russian Army attacked the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the East. After some Austrian victories – the Russian Army overtook the majority of **Galicia** including **Lwów** and the large part of the Carpathian Mountains. In October 1914 the Ottoman Empire, having prior numerous conflicts with Russia and not being interested in enlarging by Russia its territories, as well as being an alliance of Germany, joined World War I and blocked the *Entante*'s help for Russia (mainly British) on the Black Sea. The Ottoman Empire closed Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits for supply transports for the Russian Army what led afterwards (in 1915) to famous Battle of Gallipoli failed by *Entante*.<sup>13</sup> After this failure and without a support from outside, Russia gradually weakened till 1917 when its internal problems on the top of it (Bolshevik revolution) excluded her practically from the War.<sup>14</sup> Thus, this action of the Ottoman Empire supporting Galicia including Poles living there in their fights against the Russian invasion weakened Russia and defended Galicia. The Russian Empire

<sup>13</sup> Richter Heinz A.: *The Ottoman Empire in World War I: untill the peace 1923*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, in Kommission, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Stone, David R.: *The Russian Army in the Great War: the Eastern Front, 1914-1918*. [eBook]. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015

Army's propaganda saying that they are coming to liberate Slaves didn't find a support of Galicia, as the Russian policy was already well-known especially to Poles from the methods applied on the Polish territories occupied already by Russia. In 1916 and 1917 the XV Corps of the Ottoman Empire arrived in Galicia (near 33.000 soldiers)<sup>15</sup> and fought on the Galicia front against the Russian invasion. They contributed to the success of backing the Russian Army<sup>16</sup> and we have a separate and more detailed paper of our Guests on this subject in the program of this conference. Also a visit to the cemetery of the XV Corps of the Ottoman Empire's casualties nearby Kraków (there were overall about 12.000 Turkish casualties)<sup>17</sup> as well as to Auschwitz are important points of your current visit in Poland. Incidentally, a strong support of Soviet Union during World War II by Western Alliances (mainly Great Britain) to strengthen its defense against Germany without any protection of the East European countries let finally to the Iron Curtin and the holistic Soviet occupation of these countries after World War II (Turkey proclaimed neutrality during World War II but the Alliant's support for Russia was transported by the Northern patch).

#### **F- THE ITALIAN VICTORY BY VITTORIO VENETO**

Meantime, on the Italian front after a spectacular Austro-German victory by Caporetto in the Twelfth Battle of Isonzo – Italy, strongly supported by *Entante* and strengthened additionally by USA who joined already the War, conquered finally in 1918 by Vittorio Veneto and it all weakened the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Also in April 1918 in Rome took place a Congress of Suppressed Nations by the Austro-Hungarian Empire encouraging them to liberate from the Austrian occupation. When USA proclaimed a war against Germany in April 1917 strengthening *Entante* on the Western front – Germans gradually were losing theirs power, too. All this led to the failure of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany and Russia and brought a new hope of independence for Poland.

Despite my Grandfather was classified as a casualty after the Twelfth Battle of Caporetto, however, taken to the hospital he recovered. As mobile phones didn't existed

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<sup>15</sup> Stachnik, Paweł: *Gdzie ta Galicia panie dowódco? Turcy na froncie wschodnim*. [online] "Dziennik Polski. Magazyn Kroniki Krakowskiej", 2 kwietnia 2016 [Access: 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2019] <https://dziennikpolski24.pl/gdziez-ta-galicja-panie-dowodco-turcy-na-froncie-wschodnim/ar/9818114>

<sup>16</sup> Yazman, Mehmet Sevki: *Gdzie jest ta Galicia panie dowódco...? Mehmedik w Europie Turcy na froncie galicyjskim 1916-1917*. Tłum. i oprac. nauk. Piotr Nykiel. Kraków - Międzyzdroje: Wydawnictwo Arkadiusz Wingert, 2016 (Ten Piękny Wiek XIX)

<sup>17</sup> Stachnik, Paweł: *Gdzie ta Galicia panie dowódco?... op. cit.*

at that time, the family was deeply shocked when he came back home unexpectedly in Vienna at the beginning of 1918.

## **G- POLISH LEGIONS AND ITS ROLE IN ACTIONS TOWARDS AN INDEPENDENT POLAND**

Since August 1914 Poles in Galicia organized also so called “Polish Legions” initiated by Józef Piłsudski.<sup>18</sup> In 1915 there were already 3 brigades (near 16,5 thousands of Legionnaires) operating legally as a supporting arm for the Austro-Hungarian Army (Polish Auxiliary Corps) fighting mainly against the Russian’s aggression. They were also undertaking efforts towards an independence of Poland. In April 1917, however, the Austro-Hungarian Empire conveyed the Corps to the German command as so called the *Polnische Wehrmacht*. It caused a deep crisis of the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1917 as majority of Legionnaires rejected to take an oath of enlistment for such a military service. Józef Piłsudski was arrested, majority of Legionnaires were detained by German command. In such circumstances they declared to join the Austro-Hungarian Army and as a result more than 3000 of Legionnaires were sent to the Italian front just before the Twelfth Caporetto Battle.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of 1918 all the three empires: Germany, Austria and Russia weakened and on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January of 1918 there was already the first piece project on the table by Thomas Woodrow Wilson suggesting amongst the others creation an independent Poland.

## **H- THE END OF WORLD WAR I AND THE ROLE OF GALICIA IN ESTABLISHING AN INDEPENDENT POLAND**

Not going into more details, Russia, losing altogether more the 2 mil. people became not active in the War already from March 1917, Germany withdraw from the War practically on the 3<sup>th</sup> of October 1918. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1918 the Austro-Hungarian Empire signed armistice with Italy and it was the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. World War I finished 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918.

Release of Józef Piłsudski from jail (Magdeburg, Germany) in 1918 and reunion of Polish Legionnaires enabled creation later on of the Polish Army. Majority of Polish

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<sup>18</sup> Wysocki, Wiesław Jan; Cygan, Wiktor Krzysztof; Kasprzyk, Jan Józef: *Legiony Polskie 1914-1918* [Warszawa]: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa; [Katowice]: Stowarzyszenie Pokolenie, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Snopko, Jan: *Legioniści polscy na froncie włoskim w latach 1917-1918*. „Przegląd Historyczno-Wojсковy” 2011, 12(63)/1(234) s. 7-22 (Artykuły i Rozprawy)



soldiers from the former three armies of the partitioned Poland joined Polish Legions what led to creation of the trained and seasoned Polish Army. This army was also enriched by so called the Polish “Blue Army” by the command of Józef Haller<sup>20</sup> who came back from the Western front. My Grandfather joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of the Polish Legions. He became a member of the Polish Liquidation Committee with its seats in Kraków whose aim was to maintain order on the Galicia territory during the establishing of an independent Poland. Then he was moved to Warsaw as a captain in the General Edward Rydz-Śmigły’s<sup>21</sup> headquarter, who later on became Marshal of Poland and Commander-in-Chief of Poland’s armed forces. The picture below shows my Grandfather in 1923 already in the Polish uniform with my Grandmother, my Mother and her younger Brother.



**Photo from the family archive of the Author**

After World War I several smaller countries gained its independence on the territories of the former three empires like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) including separated Austria and Hungary, countries of Western Balkans and so on. This countries, defended now by the NATO brigades, are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence today and we all here, too. There

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<sup>20</sup> Orłowski, Marek: *General Józef Haller (1873-1960)* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Mirowicz, Ryszard: *Edward Rydz-Śmigły: działalność wojskowa i polityczna*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Związków Zawodowych, 1988.



is no doubt that in the circumstances when Galicia had no sufficient arm forces to fight against Russian invasion because of ongoing fights on the Italian front – the Ottoman Empire’s help saved it from a devastation and an incorporation to Russia. It enabled then a recovery of independent Poland what has begun in defended Galicia. A prophecy that “Poland will regain its sovereignty when Turkish horses drink water from the Vistula River” - came true.

This all didn’t finish Polish problems with the Soviet Union in establishing the Eastern frontier of Poland after World War I because of the subsequent Soviet invasion in 1920. But the great Polish victory in this war known as the “Miracle on the Vistula River” of the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1920, which not only stopped and backed the Soviet Army from the Polish territories but also saved the whole Western Europe from the Bolshevik invasion (what in fact was the main target of the Red Army) let to peace which lasted until the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1939 when the next war - World War II begin.....!

### Polish borders after World War I



**P.S.** My Grandfather was released from the service in 1929 but drafted again in 1939 died in the German prison-of-war camp (Oflag - Offizierslager für kriegsgefangene Offiziere –) in Germany in 1941.

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