

= Polish Legions (Napoleonic period) =

The Polish Legions (also known as the Dąbrowski Legions) in the Napoleonic period , were several Polish military units that served with the French Army , mainly from 1797 to 1803 , although some units continued to serve until 1815 .

After the Third Partition of Poland in 1795 , many Poles believed that Revolutionary France and her allies would come to Poland 's aid . France 's enemies included Poland 's partitioners , Prussia , Austria and Imperial Russia . Many Polish soldiers , officers and volunteers therefore emigrated , especially to Italy (leading to the expression , " the Polish Legions in Italy ") and to France , where they joined forces with the local military . The number of Polish recruits soon reached many thousands . With support from Napoleon Bonaparte , Polish military units were formed , bearing Polish military ranks and commanded by Polish officers . They became known as the " Polish Legions " ; a Polish army in exile , under French command . Their best known Polish commanders included Jan Henryk Dąbrowski , Karol Kniażiewicz and Józef Wybicki .

The Polish Legions serving alongside the French Army during the Napoleonic Wars saw combat in most of Napoleon 's campaigns , from the West Indies , through Italy and Egypt . When the Duchy of Warsaw was created in 1807 , many of the veterans of the Legions formed a core around which the Duchy 's army was raised under Józef Poniąkowski . This force fought a victorious war against Austria in 1809 and would go on to fight alongside the French army in numerous campaigns , culminating in the disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812 , which marked the end of the Napoleonic empire , including the Legions , and allied states like the Duchy of Warsaw .

= = Timeframe and numbers = =

Among historians there is a degree of uncertainty about the period in which the Legions existed . Magocsi et al. notes that " the heyday of their activity " falls in the years 1797 ? 1801 , while Lerski defines the Legions as units that operated between 1797 and 1803 . Similarly , Davies defines the time of their existence as five to six years . The Polish PWN Encyklopedia defines them as units operating in the period of 1797 ? 1801 (in 1801 the Legions were reorganized into demi @-@ brigades) . The Polish WIEM Encyklopedia notes that the Legions ended with the death of most of their personnel in the Haitian campaign , which concluded in 1803 . When recounting the history of the Polish Legions , some works also describe the operations of Polish units under the French in the period after 1803 ; several smaller formations existed in that time , the most notable of which was the Vistula Legion , which existed between 1808 and 1813 .

Estimates of the strength of the Polish Legions also vary and it is believed that between 20 @,@ 000 and 30 @,@ 000 men served in the Legions ' ranks at any one time over the course of their existence . The WIEM Encyklopedia estimate is 21 @,@ 000 for the period up to 1803 . Davies suggests 25 @,@ 000 for the period of up to 1802 ? 1803 , as does Magocsi et al . Bideleux and Jeffries offer an estimate of up to 30 @,@ 000 for the period up to 1801 . Most of the soldiers came from the ranks of the peasantry , with only about 10 percent being drawn from the nobility .

= = Origins = =

After the Third Partition of Poland (1795) , many Poles believed that revolutionary France , whose public opinion was very sympathetic to the ideals of the Polish Constitution of 3 May 1791 , would come to Poland 's aid . France 's enemies included Poland 's partitioners , Prussia , Austria and Imperial Russia . Paris was the seat of two Polish organizations laying the claim to be the Polish government @-@ in @-@ exile , the Deputation (Deputacja) of Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski and the Agency (Agencja) of Józef Wybicki . Many Polish soldiers , officers and volunteers therefore emigrated , especially to Italy and to France . Eventually , the Agency was successful in convincing the French government (the Directory) to organize a Polish military unit . As the French Constitution did not allow for the employment of foreign troops on French soil , the French decided to use the Poles to bolster their allies in Italy , the Cisalpine Republic .

Jan Henryk Dąbrowski , a former high ranking officer in the army of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth , began his work in 1796 ? a year after the total destruction of the Commonwealth . At that time he went to Paris , and later , Milan , where his idea received support from Napoleon Bonaparte , who saw the Poles as a promising source of new recruits , and who superficially appeared receptive to the idea of liberating Poland . Dąbrowski was soon authorized by the French allied Cisalpine Republic to create the Polish Legions , which would be part of the army of the newly created Republic of Lombardy . This agreement , drafted by Napoleon , was signed on 9 January 1797 , and marked the formal creation of the Legions .

= = Operational history = =

= = = War of the First Coalition : Polish Legions in Italy = = =

The Polish soldiers serving in the Dąbrowski Legion were granted Lombardian citizenship and were paid the same wage as other troops . They were allowed to use their own unique Polish style uniforms , with some French and Lombardian symbols , and were commanded by other Polish speakers . By early February 1797 the Legion was 1 , 200 strong , having been bolstered by the arrival of many new recruits who had deserted from the Austrian army .

The Dąbrowski Legion was first used against Austrians and their allies in Italy . In March 1797 it garrisoned Mantua , and by the end of the month it took part in its first combat during the Ten Days of Brescia . By the end of April the ranks of the Legion had swelled to 5 , 000 . At that time Dąbrowski lobbied for a plan to push through to the Polish territories in Galicia , but that was eventually rejected by Napoleon who instead decided to use those troops on the Italian front . In April , the Legion took part in quelling the uprising in Verona , known as Veronese Easter . The Treaty of Leoben signed that month , which promised peace between Austrians and French , was a blow to Polish morale , but Dąbrowski correctly assumed that it would not last .

Sources vary with regards to when the singular Dąbrowski Legion was expanded into multiple Legions . Pivka and Roffe note that in May 1797 the Legion was reorganized into two formations , the first being commanded by Karol Kniaziewicz and the second by Józef Wielhorski , each numbering about 3 , 750 infantry , not counting artillery support . Davies , however , states that the Second Legion was formed in 1798 under Józef Zajczek . In July 1797 the Legions suppressed another insurrection , this time in Reggio Emilia .

The Treaty of Campo Formio , signed on 18 October 1797 , resulted in another short period of relative peace . The Legions , hopeful for a renewal of the war , were seen as the most pro-French foreign forces in the Cisalpine . In May 1798 the Poles helped the French to secure the Papal States , putting down some peasant revolts , and garrisoned Rome , which they entered on 3 May . Dąbrowski obtained a number of trophies from a Roman representative , that the Polish king , Jan III Sobieski , had sent there after his victory over the Ottoman Empire at the siege of Vienna in 1683 ; amongst these was an Ottoman standard which subsequently became part of the Legions ' colors , accompanying them from then on .

By the end of 1798 the Legions under Kniaziewicz were fighting against the anti-French forces from the Kingdom of Naples , defeating them at the Battle of Civita Castellana on 4 December . Soon afterward , supplies from the captured Gaeta fortress allowed the creation of a Legion cavalry unit under Andrzej Karwowski . The Poles then fought at Magliano , Faleri , Calvi and Capua before Naples capitulated on 23 January .

= = = War of the Second Coalition : Italian front = = =

The end of the 1798 and the beginning of 1799 marked the beginning of the War of the Second Coalition . Within about a year of its formation , the Legion had become about 10 , 000 . However , the new series of struggles proved to be much more difficult , as the anti-French coalition advanced upon Italy , now bereft of elite French units which were with Napoleon in Egypt .

Overall , 1799 saw the Legions take significant casualties . In mid @-@ 1799 , the First Legion under General Dąbrowski fought against the Russians at Trebbia (17 ? 19 June 1799) , where it suffered heavy casualties (only two of the five battalions survived the battle , and Dąbrowski was wounded) . Polish legionaries also fought at the Battle of Novi (15 July 1799) , and the Second Battle of Zurich (26 September) .

The Second Legion also suffered heavily ; particularly in the first battles on the Adige (26 March ? 5 April 1799) where it is estimated that it lost about half to two thirds of its complement of 4 @, @ 000 men . Its commander , General Franciszek Rymkiewicz , was killed at the Battle of Magnano on 5 April . The remainder of the Second Legion became part of the garrison at Mantua , which was soon placed under siege by the Austrians . Finally , at the end of the Siege of Mantua (April ? July) , the French commander François @-@ Philippe de Foissac @-@ Latour decided to release Polish soldiers ? then under Wielhorski ? into Austrian custody as the Austrians claimed them to be deserters . This marked the end of the Second Legion , as only a small number of Poles were able to evade capture (the French were allowed to withdraw most of their forces under the condition that they would remain neutral) .

= = = War of the Second Coalition : German front = = =

With the end of the Cisalpine Republic , the Legions were reorganized in France , as Napoleon ascended to power as the First Consul and decreed that foreign troops could now serve in the French Army . On 10 February the remnants of the Italian Legions were reorganized near Marseilles into the Italian Legion (La Legion Italique) as a 9 @, @ 000 @-@ strong unit (although soon reduced to 5 @, @ 000) that would become part of the Army of Italy . The Legion fought at the Peschiera and Mantua .

In 1800 or 1799 (sources vary) , Karol Kniaziewicz organized the 6 @, @ 000 @-@ strong Third Legion (the Danube Legion , or the Legion du Rhine) to fight against the Austrians in Bavaria . The Danube Legion , bolstered by Karwowski 's cavalry unit , fought as part of the Army of the Rhine at Berg , Bernheim and Offenburg , garrisoning the fortress of Philippsbourg after the armistice of Parsdorf (15 July) . Polish forces also fought in the Battle of Hohenlinden on 3 December 1800 . According to Davies , the Danube Legion would suffer significant casualties in the short period after the battle and the end of the campaign on 25 December that year .

The size of the Legions decreased after the Treaty of Luneville (9 February 1801) , which to the disappointment of the legionnaires made no mention of Poland . The Legions was transferred to police duties in the Kingdom of Etruria . The Legions ' morale weakened as Poles were not used in any fights that seemed to directly affect the chance of Poland regaining independence . Many legionnaires , including General Kniaziewicz , felt that they had been used by the French and resigned . Dąbrowski remained in command , and reorganized both Legions at Milan into two 6 @, @ 000 @-@ strong units in March 1801 . On 21 December 1801 the Legions were reorganized by the French government into three demi @-@ brigades , with the Italian (First) Legion forming the core of the First and Second Foreign Demi @-@ Brigades (1er and 2e Demi @-@ Brigade Étrangère) , and the Danube (Second) Legion , the Third Foreign Demi @-@ Brigade (3e Demi @-@ Brigade Étrangère) .

= = = The Haitian campaign = = =

In 1802 , France sent most of the disgruntled legionnaires (two demi @-@ brigades , 5 @, @ 280 strong) to Haiti to put down the Haitian Revolution (on the Caribbean island of Haiti , known then as Saint Domingue , the French West Indies) . Napoleon wanted to regain the colony of Saint Domingue , but preferred to save his main French army for more important matters , closer to home . The now inconvenient Polish units were accompanied by contingents of Germans and Swiss French allies , as well as by French units that had fallen out of favour with Napoleon and the French high command .

The Haitian campaign proved disastrous for the legionnaires . Combat casualties and tropical

diseases , including the yellow fever , reduced the 5 @, @ 280 @-@ strong Polish contingent to a few hundred survivors in the space of less than two years . By the time the French forces retreated from the island in 1803 , about 4 @, @ 000 Poles had died (either from disease or combat) . Of the survivors , about 400 remained on the island , a few dozen were dispersed to the nearby islands or to the United States , and about 700 returned to France (Urbankowski claims 6 @, @ 000 sent and 330 returned) .

The Poles had little interest or desire to support the French cause in the distant colonies , once again fighting against people who only desired their own independence . In Haiti there still is a popular myth that many Polish soldiers became sympathetic to the former slaves ' cause and deserted the French , supporting Jean @-@ Jacques Dessalines in significant numbers , with entire units changing sides . In fact , the actual desertion rate was much lower ; nonetheless about 150 Polish soldiers joined the Haitian rebels . The loss of that many patriotic military personnel in the Caribbean was a serious blow to the Polish aspirations for regaining independence . The Haitian experience cast further doubts among Poles about France 's and Napoleon 's good intentions toward Poland .

= = = Wars of the Third and Fourth Coalition = = =

By 1805 , during the War of the Third Coalition , the Polish troops in Italy had been renamed the 1st Polish Legion (1e Legion Polonaise) and attached to the Kingdom of Italy . In 1806 , all that was left of the old D?browski and Kniaziewicz 's Legions was one demi @-@ brigade , consisting of one infantry regiment and one cavalry regiment , now in the service of the Kingdom of Naples . It fought at Castel Franco , turning the Austrian attack on 24 November 1805 , but on 3 July 1806 it suffered a severe defeat at Sant 'Eufemia a Maiella . Many Polish officers served in French army or allied formations .

During the War of the Fourth Coalition , Napoleon decided to encourage Polish defections from the Prussian army , and on 20 September 1806 decreed the creation of a " Northern Legion " under General Zaj?czek . As the Napoleon did not want to commit himself to the Polish cause , the Legion was however not explicitly Polish , and was , in Napoleon 's words , a gathering of " children of the North " . French armies , including the Legion units , defeated the Prussians in Saxony at the battle of Jena and Poles under D?browski entered former Polish territories (near the city of Pozna?) , which resulted in the influx of recruits for the legion . A year later , Napoleon , having defeated the Russian armies , met with the Russian Tsar Alexander I at Tilsit and in the ensuing negotiations they agreed that a new , small Polish state under French control (the Duchy of Warsaw) would be created .

= = = After the creation of the Duchy of Warsaw : the Vistula Legion = = =

The main period that the Legions were active was between 1797 and 1803 . Although some chose to remain with the French forces , and fought in Italy under the Kingdom of Naples , in 1807 many veteran legionnaires formed a cadre for the new Army of the Duchy of Warsaw . In February 1807 , the remaining infantry and cavalry regiments who had continued in French service in Italy were reorganized in Silesia , near Breslau , into a Polish @-@ Italian Legion (Polaccoltalienne) , with two new infantry regiments added from the newly liberated Polish lands . On 21 February 1808 , the Legion was relocated to France , reinforced with Poles from other French formations , and incorporated into the French army . On 31 March of that year the legion was officially named the Vistula Legion (Légion de la Vistule , Legia Nadwi?la?ska) . By mid @-@ 1808 the Vistula Legion had a strength of 6 @, @ 000 . After the Battle of Wagram (5 ? 6 July 1809) Napoleon attempted to form a second Polish Vistula Legion from Polish prisoners of war , but the new formation could not attract sufficient recruits , and in 1810 it was merged into the original Vistula Legion .

During the Peninsular War (1809 ? 1814) in Spain , the Vistula Legion gained fame at the Battle of Zaragoza . In the Battle of Fuengirola , a small Polish force managed to defeat an Anglo @-@ Spanish expeditionary force outnumbering them 10 @-@ 1 , capturing their commander in the

process . Other troops served in Napoleon 's Imperial Guard and the Polish Cheval @-@ léger regiment distinguished itself at the Battle of Somosierra in 1808 . Another Polish cavalry regiment ? the Vistula uhlans ? also fought in Spain . They distinguished themselves many times there , including at the Battle of Albuhera in 1811 , where they destroyed a British infantry brigade . Their valour in that conflict inspired the British to create their own lancer units equipped with Polish @-@ style uniforms and weapons .

In 1812 , as Napoleon entered Russia , the Poles and Lithuanians rallied to Napoleon 's Grande Armée in the hope of resurrecting the Commonwealth . The Vistula Legion , withdrawn from Spain in early 1812 and reorganized into a division (with a planned strength of 10 @,@ 500 that was never fully attained) was part of Napoleon 's invasion forces . Poles formed the largest foreign contingent , 98 @,@ 000 @-@ strong (the entire French Grande Armée was about 600 @,@ 000 strong) . Polish Lancers of the Vistula Legion were the first unit to cross the Neman River when the Grand Armee entered Russia and , as part of the Imperial Guard , the first unit to enter Moscow . They distinguished themselves in the Battle of Borodino and , under Prince Józef Poniatowski (who personally saved Napoleon 's life) , were one of the units that served as the rear guard during Napoleon 's retreat . This later led to the claim that just as they had been the first to enter it , they were the last to leave Russia . They sustained heavy losses during the campaign : only 26 @,@ 000 of the original 98 @,@ 000 @-@ strong contingent returned . The elite Vistula Legion entering Russia was about 7 @,@ 000 strong ; its strength at the end of the campaign was just 1 @,@ 500 .

The definitive end of the Polish Legions came with the conclusion of Napoleon 's career and the abolition of the Duchy of Warsaw . The Duchy was occupied by Prussian and Russian troops following Napoleon 's retreat from Russia . The Polish troops remained loyal to him until the bitter end , with Polish units holding their ground at his last battles at Leipzig (15 ? 19 October 1813) and Hanau (30 ? 31 October 1813) , where they sustained major losses . The Legion was recreated at Sedan in early 1814 , and fought at Soissons , Reims , Arcis @-@ sur @-@ Aube and St @-@ Dizier . After Napoleon 's defeat in the War of the Sixth Coalition , when Napoleon was forced into exile on Elba , the only unit he was allowed to keep as guards were the Polish Lancers . While many Poles returned to the Polish territories , a unit of about 325 men under Colonel Golaszewski fought in Napoleon 's final 1815 campaign , the " Hundred Days " , participating in the Battle of Waterloo . After Napoleon 's second and final defeat , some are said to have accompanied him to his exile on Saint Helena .

= = Assessment and remembrance = =

In analyzing the creation of the Polish Legions , many historians have argued that Napoleon used the Poles as a source of recruits and had little desire to invest in the re @-@ creation of the Polish state . Among the most notable of Napoleon 's contemporary Polish detractors was Ko?ciuszko , who refused to join the Legions , arguing that Napoleon would not restore Poland in any durable form . In this regard , Ko?ciuszko also stated that the Duchy of Warsaw was created in 1807 only because it was expedient , rather than because Napoleon supported Polish sovereignty . Nevertheless , the memory of Napoleon 's Polish Legions is strong in Poland , and Napoleon himself is often regarded as a hero and liberator there . About the Polish Legion , Napoleon himself is reputed to have said that 800 Poles would equal 8 @,@ 000 enemy soldiers .

Despite their destruction , the Legions became legendary in Poland , helping to spread the civic and democratic ideals of the French Revolution throughout the country . The legionnaires formed a cadre for the Army of the Duchy of Warsaw and also later for the Army of the Congress Kingdom .

The Legions are also notable as the source of one of the themes contained in the future Polish national anthem , Mazurek D?browskiego (Poland Is Not Yet Lost) . Created by Józef Wybicki , the anthem includes words promising " the return of the Polish army from Italy to Poland " and states that " Poland is not lost as long as we live " in reference to the Polish Legions .

= = Fiction = =

Michael Large , Song of the Legions , 2011 , a novel about the origin of the Polish Legion , ISBN 978 0 0 9568853 0 2 .