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The development of the Polish Navy after 1918 – selected problems

Introduction

The end of the First World War, unfavourable for the central countries, led to huge political changes on the European map of the time. In 1918, after almost a century and a half of enslavement, Poland regained its independence. In the beginning, Poland had no sea access and it was not sure if it ever was to gain one. However, Poland decided not to wait idly for the victorious countries to make the decision regarding the matter and directly after regaining the independence, it started creating the Polish Navy structures. In 1918 the Navy was born and had to face countless obstacles on its way to full development – most of the problems concerned the equipment and executive commandment.

The cadre was formed by specialists coming from three areas of partition – Russian, Prussian and Austria-Hungarian. There were no ports as well as no place to make it naval headquarters. During the interwar period there were four new ports built in Poland: Gdynia, Jastarnia, Władysławowo, and Hel (which was strictly war port). Only Gdynia and Hel were destined to become bigger ones with wharfs and naval fleet supply. The enlisted port investments were realized due to the loans given to Poland by France.

The plans concerning the development of the Polish war fleet were ambitious and long-term. In the often-changing concepts the main idea was to remember that Poland's biggest opponent will be the Soviet Union, but there

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were also plans to build wartime vessels capable of taking part in the Atlantic and oceanic war actions.

The main research matter of the given work focuses on the development of the Polish Navy post 1918 and depicting the conditions of this process; its main problems and the results of the Navy's growth and its interwar period achievements. In order to answer the question, an analysis was made of the available materials and monographs. A critical analysis of the given materials allowed to isolate some of their essential and substantial parts, useful for this particular monograph. The information and knowledge gained allowed to prepare the given monograph.

Background & Analysis

„As of 28th of November 1918, I command to form Polish Navy and I place it under the command of Captain Bogumił Nowotny as its first Chief”³. – those words by Józef Piłsudski, Polish Chief of State, served as a legislative that allowed for the Polish Navy to be born. The decree was a strong declaration articulating the will of gaining the access to the Baltic Sea. It is important to underline that at the time the Polish Navy was born, Poland not only did not have the sea access, but it also lacked the region of the Suwałki Region. The beginnings of the Navy revolved around the river flotillas.

At the same time the Maritime administration was being created, Poland was trying to get its very first warships. The country wanted to gain access to the part of the partitioners' fleet and on March 3rd 1919 it asked for a part of German and Austrian fleets. As a result, Poland got only six post-German torpedo-boats. The attempts of getting one or two light cruisers, two destroyers and a certain number of torpedo boats and auxiliary units were all in vain⁴.

As it was settled during the Versailles peace conference which took place in January 1920, Poland received a small, only 70 km-long (the Hel Peninsula excluded) strip of the coastline from Gdańsk to the Hel Peninsula and thus gained two fishing ports: Hel and Puck. The two ports were small and squalid, but most of all they were fishing harbour, unsuitable for a war fleet. For the time needed to build a war harbour, Poland was allowed to use a *port d'attache* in Gdańsk for the trade purposes but not for the naval ones⁵.

It is important to underscore that Poland, at the time of gaining the coastline, had no vessels capable of serving as either trade or war ships. It led to

³ Rozkaz do Ministerstwa Spraw Wojskowych, „Monitor Polski” 1918, nr 217, s. 1.

⁴ S. Ordon, *Polska Marynarka Wojenna w latach 1918–1939*, Gdynia 1966, s. 21.

⁵ M. Neumann, *Flota II Rzeczypospolitej i jej okręty*, Łomianki 2013, s. 19.

the conclusion that the fleet had to be either bought or build. The post-war circumstances, technically, worked in favour of the idea of purchasing new ships for the navy, because all the maritime power-countries were looking for a chance to get rid of the equipment no longer considered necessary. However, Polish currency was too weak in comparison with other countries currencies and thus the only possible way of purchasing the naval equipment was to take bank loans to make payments possible.

Since the very beginning of the Polish Navy's existence, the prime concept of its existence relied on the notion of „two enemies”, described R (for Russia) and N (for Germany). This idea was the main reason the Navy's weakness during the interwar period⁶. The geopolitical position of the Polish coastline, between the Free City of Danzig and Western Prussia made the command realise that it would be difficult to take the advantage of the sea access in case a war with Germany. The Navy could barely be even seen in the military structures, it was most often invisible, underrated and ignored. Despite many opponents and Great Britain's lack of enthusiasm towards Poland's presence at sea, the Polish Navy's command kept pursuing the idea of building a fleet⁷.

According to some points of view, Poland was firstly supposed to build a defence fleet, consisting mostly of submarines and torpedo boats. Such views were represented mostly by commander J. Świrski and they were included in a ten-year plan of Polish Navy's growth and development. The program included getting two battleships, six cruisers, twenty-eight counter-torpedo motor boats, forty-five submarines, twenty-eight minehunters, fifty-four motor torpedo boats and fourteen auxiliary vessels. The plan was to be prestigious and served propaganda purposes; its main aim was to build a strong fleet, river flotillas as well as maritime aviation⁸. The contemporary Polish political situation, especially if one takes into account the state of the economy – the economy of a country trying to rebuild itself after more than one hundred and twenty years of non-existing – made the plan unrealistic and was rejected by the Ministry of Military Affairs. A plan minimum was drawn, meant to take place between 1921 and 1923 during that time the Navy was to purchase: one light cruiser, four destroyers, six minesweepers, two submarines and twelve torpedo-boats⁹. Even such a minimum plan could not be fulfilled for many

⁶ S. Ordon, op.cit., s. 55.

⁷ C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, *Polska Marynarka Wojenna 1918–1980*, Warszawa 1992, s. V22–24.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ S. Ordon, op.cit., s. 59.

years. The British help with constructing the fleet was revoked and severely limited to the categories of materials, administration and hydrographic.

Further programs concerning the development of the fleet were created during the time dominated by the Polish-French military Alliance. Its main point was mutual help in case of a German attack and it obligated France to help Poland both on land and at sea in case of a Russian aggression as well¹⁰. The consequence of the alliance was a Polish resignation from British maritime mission which was replaced in 1923 by a French maritime mission. French help was focused on organizing trainings and preparing regulations as well as training war ships' crews and organizing the officers' trips for studies and courses prepared by the French Navy¹¹. Meanwhile in April 1920, the Puck harbour became the very first base for the Polish Navy¹².

The development of the Polish Navy was rapidly stopped due to the disadvantageous military situation during the Polish-Bolshie front. The Polish Navy units were dissolved and turned into formations to combat on land. Two tow-boats were bought in Finland, from Nurminen company (named later "Wanda" and "Kraków") for 75.000 Finnish marks. Once the military operations in the East were over, the Polish Navy was given its very first battleships, gunboats bought in Finland, "Generał Haller" and "Komendant Piłsudski." While the transaction was being carried out, it turned out the Brits were planning to neutralize the Baltic Sea – after they got the information about the planned purchase, one of the British associations made an offer to buy one of the vessels for a higher price, but the offer was rejected. The attempt to buy Russian war ships was not successful either; the Polish Navy's demands in this area, even concerning a reduced version, were not even included in the Riga peace treaty¹³.

Poland's worsening economic situation, especially between 1922 and 1923 was particularly difficult for the Polish Navy. The Ministry of Finances was sure it was the source of more disadvantages than advantages and cost too much money. A gigantic inflation stopped every single idea of expanding and developing the fleet. The French war loan did not improve the financial situation. The negotiations between the Polish and the French government ended in 1924 with the decision of loaning Poland 400 mln French francs in four installments. Poland resigned from the last installment in 1925¹⁴.

¹⁰ M. Neumann, *op.cit.*, s. 21.

¹¹ C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, *op.cit.*, s. 25.

¹² M. Neumann, *op.cit.*, s. 21.

¹³ *Ibidem*, s. 23–26.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 35.

Poland, wanting to raise its position as a potential military ally, kept underscoring its will to develop its own navy, something the French found truly interesting. In 1924, due to a better worldwide economy situation, a new, so-called “small”, plan of developing Polish fleet was born. It assumed purchasing two cruisers, six destroyers, twelve submarines and twelve torpedo-boats¹⁵. This time the plan was successful, although in a slightly less impressive form, although it did raise some second thoughts among the commandment; the size and structure of the fleet still seemed doubtful, especially while taking the country's economic situation of that time into account. The budget restriction forced the plan to be changed and the purchasing to be reduced. As a result, a preliminary plan of the fleet development for years 1925–1928 was introduced. The plan was constructed in accordance with general Sikorski's intentions and the suggestions of the French staff officers who were deeply convinced that Poland ought to have had its own navy, with submarines being its main weaponry¹⁶. One of the milestones concerning the fleet development was a contract signed in Paris on April 2nd 1924 between Poland and Blanville's Chantiers Naval Francais shipyard, which pledged the French company to build two destroyers (slightly modified Bourrasque type, later on named “Wicher” and “Burza”) for the Polish Navy. At the same time a contract was signed to build first three submarines („Wilk”, „Ryś”, „Żbik”) which, next to the destroyers, became the very first new and then-modern vessels serving the Polish military¹⁷.

Fig. 1. Destroyer ORP “Wicher”

Source: Polish Navy archives.

¹⁵ S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 60.

¹⁶ C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, *op.cit.*, s. 26.

¹⁷ W. Koszela, *Niszczyciele Polskiej Marynarki Wojennej*, Warszawa 2013, s. 14.

While all of this was happening, the military harbour in Gdynia was being built which was to become the navy's main base.

Apart from the progress concerning the development of the fleet, it is not possible to omit the fact that during the very first years after Poland had regained its independence, the navy project did not include creating the land defense of the coastal area¹⁸.

Due to the French being behind the schedule, the Polish Navy had to wait for new destroyers as long as four years, so twice as long as it had been settled in the contract signed. However, hanging the Polish flag on the Poland's very first destroyer, "Wicher," was a truly historical moment pushing the Polish fleet into the time of development and progress which was materialized by obtaining the second destroyer, "Burza". Apart from the battleships, the Submarine Squadron was born with "Wilk", "Ryś" and "Żbik"¹⁹.

Fig. 2. Underwater minelayer ORP "Żbik"

Source: Polish Navy archive.

The military coup made a shift in the nation's views that Poland's main enemy is not Germany but the USSR and thus the future war was to be a land conflict, not a naval one. Such a vision followed Piłsudski's point of view, who considered the maritime issues as things of less importance. That is why the better economy did not affect the investments and development of the fleet²⁰.

¹⁸ S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 62.

¹⁹ W. Koszela, *op.cit.*, s. 14.

²⁰ M. Neumann, *op.cit.*, s. 46–47.

Fig. 3. Submarine ORP "Orzeł"

Source: Polish Navy archives.

Fig. 4. Destroyer ORP "Błyskawica"

Source: Polish Navy archives.

In the time the Great Depression, the Polish Navy stopped planning any development. The controversies as to whether treat it as a plan or not surround the legislation from 1931 according to which a war harbour was to be built, 150.000 tons big. The so-called program "A" assumed building two destroyers, five submarines, four minesweepers, a minelayer and a base-vessel for the underwater weaponry. Due to the legislation was a base-vessel "Sławomir

Czerwiński” bought in 1932, a year later two submarines were ordered in Holland (later known as “Orzeł,” and “Sęp”) and minesweepers („Jaskółka”, „Mewa”, „Rybitwa”, „Czajka”) were built in Poland, and in 1934 in England a building of the fleet of destroyers commenced (“Grom” and “Błyskawica”). Program “A” was fully realized²¹.

The 1930s were filled with lack of any unitary points of view concerning the development of the Polish Navy either from the government or the commandment of both navy and military in general. The lack of financial support was omnipresent. It was not until the second half of the 1930s and the then-ongoing arms race and the growing threat against Poland’s independence that the further decision concerning the development of the armed forces, including the Polish Navy were made. The Navy’s commandment changed their mind about the development of the navy and came up with a six-years-long development plan that was to be pursued between 1936 and 1942. According to the plan, the fleet was to have eight destroyers, twelve submarines, one minelayer, twelve minesweepers and ten torpedo-boats. The aviation was to be equipped in modern seaplanes, and the Hel base was to be developed and strengthen against the land attack²².

During the last pre-war years a ten-year-long maritime plan was born which assumed that by 1946 Poland would have three armored ships, one cruiser, two minelayers, twelve destroyers, twenty-one submarines, twelve torpedo-boats and twenty-five auxiliary ships. The program had a propaganda agenda and even though it was never successfully perused, it was used to justify the government’s actions²³.

A crucial element, which put the country’s defensive abilities in the spotlight, was the international tension in Europe growing since 1935. Along with Hitler gaining his power, the militarization of Germany sped up and it forced the process of arming up in various European countries²⁴. It also made the “N” war option much more probable and that forced the change of the tactical plans with German fleet now being considered the biggest threat to the Polish Navy. A few scenarios of potential warfare taking place at the North Sea were prepared and, at the same time, admiral Unrug, the Navy’s commander, was more than positive that maritime warfare against Germans was entirely point-

²¹ C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, *op.cit.*, s. 26–27; M. Neumann, *op.cit.*, s. 50–51.

²² S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 74; C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, s. 27.

²³ S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 75–76.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 74.

less. He claimed that it was not possible to face the German fleet and win²⁵. In the conditions, the Polish government decided – in case of a German aggression – to rely on the military alliances with Great Britain and France, something which in September 1939 turned out to have no value at all. The beginning of war meant the development of the Polish Navy was to stop entirely.

Results

During the interwar time, the Navy commandment prepared various plans of expanding and development of the fleet. The programs were dependent first of all on the political course and economic stability of the state. The history shows that the majority of the plans were never realized, or – even so – only partially. It was because of the economic problems of the country, but also due to the lack of concrete concepts and visions as of the direction of the navy's development. The results, in comparison with the plans made by the Polish Navy Commandment were humble to say the least, and almost entire fleet was constructed in foreign shipyards. The development of the war fleet during the interwar years can be divided into two periods: the first one between 1920 and 1925 and the second one between 1926 and 1939. The first one is characterized by difficult economic and political conditions under which the fleet had to be created with small vessels being built or purchased. The second one is characterized by the construction of new, modern and bigger ships, which would not necessarily fit the Baltic Sea needs²⁶.

Between 1920 and 1923 the fleet was born. It was one of the first decisions made just after Poland got a bit of coast line. In the beginning there were only two gunboats purchased in Finland, which were named: "Komentant Piłsudski," and "Generał Haller". They served the Polish Navy well and were also treated as training vessels²⁷.

Another ships that were included in the newly-born Polish fleet were four post-German minesweepers type FM (Flachgehendes Minensuchboot) purchased in Denmark. They were named "Jaskółka", "Mewa", "Czajka" and "Rybitwa" and they became the part of the Polish fleet in the beginning of June, 1921²⁸.

Intense efforts undertaken by the representatives of the Department of the Maritime Affairs in Paris and London concerning the division of the ex-German

²⁵ M. Neumann, *op.cit.*, s. 62–66.

²⁶ S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 146.

²⁷ C. Ciesielski, W. Pater, J. Przybylski, *op.cit.*, s. 27.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, s. 28.

and ex-Austria Hungary fleets were not successful. Poland received six torpedo-boats: ORP "Kaszub", ORP "Krakowiak", ORP "Kujawiak", ORP "Mazur", ORP "Podhalanin" and ORP "Ślązak"²⁹.

Fig. 5. Torpedo boat ORP "Mazur"

Source: Polish Navy archive.

Until 1933, the Polish Navy Commandment ordered building of the war ships only to French shipyards. During the interwar period, France built about 52% of Polish fleet's tonnage (two "Wicher" destroyers, three submarines type "Wilk," one minelayer "Gryf"), England about 27% (two destroyers type "Grom"), Holland about 14% (two submarines type "Orzeł"), and Poland about 7% (six minesweepers type "Jaskółka"). Apart from that, in 1939 in Gdynia a construction of two destroyers type "Grom" was initiated, two submarines in France, and two torpedo-boats. According to the data, the vessels were mostly built in France which was the result of the above-mentioned Polish-French military alliance³⁰.

The Polish Navy's Fleet, despite difficult conditions, was being consequently and steadily developed, and was no different than what other worldwide fleets looked like. However, its military position on the Baltic Sea was quite humble. Polish war fleet, built with huge effort and big financial stretch, in 1939 consisted of nineteen battleships, including sixteen new ones. Even though it was much bigger than Denmark's or Finland's fleets, the disproportions between the Polish and German fleets, the lack of allies and not very favourable geo-

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ S. Ordon, *op.cit.*, s. 149.

political location of the coastline, turned out to be a deadly combination that led the Navy towards the inevitable defeat.

Conclusions

The history of the Polish Navy is relatively short, but it is by far very interesting. Its beginning lays in the times when Poland was reborn after years of partitions and enslavement and when the country was making an effort of creating its own military forces out of scratch, by people who had never agreed with the loss of freedom and independence. The beginnings of the Navy were determined by the political and economic difficulties and conditions. The latter were being fought with by international loans, but it still allowed only some of the purchases to be made. Undoubtedly though, Polish Navy was a part of the 2nd Republic of Poland's achievements, a factor allowing the country to be present on the Baltic Sea shore and coastline and bounding the Polish society with the sea.

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Abstract

After The World War I, which ended on the 11th September 1918, Poland once again became an independent state after more than one hundred and twenty years of partitions and enslavement. The country began a slow and laborious process of rebuilding and reconstructing many branches of economy, industry and other fields. It was the time of strengthening the borders and rebuilding the army.

Polish Navy was born in 1918 and during the process of its development, it had to face numerous difficulties – staff, equipment, technical, and others. The marine forces were developed using, mainly, loans which were granted to Poland through international negotiations. At this time, Poland's main lender and military ally was France. It was there where our very first battleships and their cannons were ordered. The very first orders were two destroyers and three underwater minelayers as well as their guns, cannons and weaponry, in the sense of artillery, mine, and torpedo weapon. The process of gaining new vessels was also built up by English loans, which were used to buy next two destroyers as well as their equipment. Another torpedoes were thus bought in Great Britain.

Despite many complications, the Polish Navy was in blossom. It had been brought to life by Józef Piłsudski on November 28th 1918.

In the paper there have been presented certain details concerning the main aspects of the destroyers and underwater minelayers in Poland after regaining independence.

Keywords: Polish Navy, fleet, defence industry, maritime safety

Развитие польского флота после 1918 года – избранные проблемы

Резюме

После Первой мировой войны, которая закончилась 11 сентября 1918 года, Польша снова стала независимым государством после более чем двадцати лет разделений и порабощения. В стране начался медленный и кропотливый процесс восстановления и реконструкции многих отраслей экономики, промышленности и других отраслей. Это было время укрепления границ и восстановления армии.

Польский военно-морской флот родился в 1918 году и в процессе своего развития ему пришлось столкнуться с многочисленными трудностями - штатом, оборудованием, техникой и другими. Морские силы были созданы с использованием, главным образом, кредитов, которые были предоставлены Польше в ходе международных переговоров. В это время основным кредитором и военным союзником Польши была Франция. Именно там были заказаны наши самые первые линейные корабли и их пушки. Самыми первыми приказами были два эсминца и три подводных минера, а также их орудия, пушки и вооружение в смысле артиллерийского, минного и торпедного оружия. Процесс приобретения новых судов был также основан на английских займах, которые использовались для покупки следующих двух эсминцев, а также их оборудования. Таким образом, в Великобритании были куплены другие торпеды.

Несмотря на многие осложнения, польский флот был в расцвете. Его оживил Юзеф Пилсудский 28 ноября 1918 года.

В документе были представлены некоторые детали, касающиеся основных аспектов миноносцев и подводных минеров в Польше после восстановления независимости.

Ключевые слова: Польский флот, флот, оборонная промышленность, безопасность на море