Collecting a Polish army for the Napoleonic wars 1807-1814

One of the great mysteries for me is why Napoleonic enthusiasts don’t have more Poles in their French armies. You always see hordes of Bavarians, Saxons, small German states by the bucket load, and more Swiss than cheese with holes in the whole of Geneva, but Poles are sadly lacking. This is even more mysterious as the Poles were excellent troops, had a large variety of units ranging from Cossacks ( termed Krakus ) to superb line infantry, chasseurs, hussars and Uhlans, and fought everywhere from Haiti to Moscow. They also had some of the most colourful uniforms of the period, and now, as there is a plethora of high quality figures on the market in scales from 6mm-28mm, there is no shortage of figures.

Historical Background

How the Poles ended up being Napoleon’s most loyal ally is a long and sad story. However, I will give a quick run through as it sets the scene, and goes some way in explaining Poland’s commitment to France. In effect, Poland went from being Europe’s premier super power in the 1600’s to being dismembered by a series of partitions in the latter half off of the 18th century, so that effectively it ceased to exist.

The situation Poland found itself in was not surprisingly very well received by many Poles, and inspired by a sense of injustice, nationalism, and revolutionary zeal, many sought out a willing ally. Thus following the Third Partition of Poland in 1795 many Poles believed that Revolutionary France would prove to be Poland’s saviour, as France’s principal enemies included Prussia, Austria and Imperial Russia - the partitioners of Poland. Polish volunteers formed military units which became known as the "Polish Legions", which were in essence a Polish army in exile under French command.
Formation of the army

Following Napoleon’s defeat of Austria, Prussia and Russia during 1805-1807, the resulting Treaty of Tilsit saw the creation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Although a vaguely democratic republic, the Duchy was placed under the domain of the Kingdom of Saxony, which led to the bizarre situation of Poland having a Saxon king, French laws, Polish army, and Prussian currency. The formation of an army proceeded rapidly, and by the end of 1807 it consisted of:

- 12 infantry regiments
- 6 cavalry regiments
- 3 batteries of artillery

Alongside these the Vistula Legion was also formed, comprising of infantry and cavalry, as well as a unit of Guard light horse. These were considered to be a part of the French army itself, and as a “nod” to its roots the Legion was allowed to carry republican standards.

1809: rebirth of a nation

The war of 1809 saw the Duchy of Warsaw feel the full weight of the Austrian attack. Initially taken by surprise, the fledgling army managed to offer determined resistance. At the Battle of Raszyn, Poniatowski fought to a standstill an Austrian force more than twice the size of the Poles, but due to the strategic situation it proved necessary to abandon Warsaw and to withdraw to the right bank of the Vistula.

The Austrian’s failed to gain a crossing of the Vistula River, and whilst they exhausted themselves in a series of futile crossing attempts, Poniatowski himself crossed the Austrian frontier to liberate Galicia. Following the Polish capture of Lublin and Sandomierz, the situation for the Austrians worsened with the capture of the Zamosc fortress. These developments compelled the Austrians to withdraw from Warsaw.

Due to the success of the Polish offensive, and the successful culmination of the campaign, saw Napoleon accept the Polish gains, with most of the liberated territory becoming incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Warsaw in October 1809. Additionally the annexation of Galicia saw the Poles raise 6 new infantry regiments and 10 cavalry regiments comprising of 1 cuirassier, 2 hussars and 7 uhlans. This meant that the strength of the Polish army at the end of 1809 was nearly 70,000 men comprising of:

- 18 infantry regiments
- 16 cavalry regiments
- Artillery and sappers
- Vistula Legion and Guard lancers

From 1808 until 1812 Polish units saw service in France, Germany and Spain under French and Polish command.
1812 - Invasion of Russia.

1812 saw the Poles viewing the invasion of Russia as a chance for the recreation of the Polish Commonwealth. Hence, the Poles were eager contributors to the endeavour, forming the largest allied contingents of the Grande Armee, with elements fighting on until the end in 1814. The strength of Polish forces at the start of the campaign was approximately 100,000 men and 165 guns, comprising of:

- 22 infantry regiments (3 field and 1 depot battalion each)
- 20 cavalry regiments (4 field and 1 depot squadron each)
- 1 foot and 1 horse artillery regiment
- Vistula Legion and Guard lancers

Polish units fought in virtually all battles during the Russia campaign, and on the whole distinguished themselves. However by the end of 1812 the Polish forces were reduced to less than 10,000 with the Vistula Legion having only 500 survivors. It should be stated that some elements of the Polish army did return more or less unscathed, bringing back 30 guns and teams.

1813 - Campaign in Germany

The beginning of the 1813 campaign saw Poniatowski withdraw across Poland in the face of overwhelming numbers, with the army of the Duchy reduced to 8,000 infantry and artillery, plus approximately 6,000 light cavalry. The condition of the Polish troops was said however to be excellent, well supplied and well quartered, as well receiving new uniforms, including, interestingly, new czapkas.

Of particular interest was that in May 1813 Napoleon formed the “Grenadier Corps”, which became part of the French Imperial Guard. This oddity consisted of three battalions, each of 4 companies, comprising of the 1st Battalion of Poles, 2nd of Saxons and 3rd of Westphalians. The Corps only got to fight one battle being more or less wiped out at Leipzig.

Leipzig

The battle of Leipzig is well covered elsewhere, but what is perhaps not realised is that this was the first time since 1809 that the Poles were able to fight as a national army, commanded by Poniatowski. It comprised of:

Advance Guard of VIII Army Corps

- Krakus Cavalry Regiment
- 14th Cuirassier Regiment (no armour)

26th Infantry Division

- Vistula Legion Infantry Regiment
- 1st Infantry Regiment
- 16th Infantry Regiment
- 8th Infantry Regiment
- 15th Infantry Regiment
- Divisional Artillery – 16 guns
27th Infantry Division

- 2nd Infantry Regiment
- 4th Infantry Regiment
- 12th Infantry Regiment
- 14th Infantry Regiment
- Divisional Artillery – 16 guns

I believe most regiments fielded two battalions.

IV Cavalry Corps

7th Light Cavalry Division

- 1st Chasseur-a-Cheval Regiment
- 3rd Uhlan Regiment
- 2nd Uhlan Regiment
- 4th Uhlan Regiment
- Horse Battery – 6 guns

8th Light Cavalry Division

- 6th Uhlan Regiment
- 8th Uhlan Regiment
- 16th Uhlan Regiment
- 13th Hussar Regiment
- Horse Battery 6 guns

I have listed these units for Leipzig to show the very diversity and strength of the Polish Army, even after the Russian debacle. At Leipzig this impressive army was more or less wiped out as meaningful fighting force, with their commander, Poniatowski, being drowned on the final day of the battle.

1814 - Campaign in France.

After Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig the majority of Polish army was now dead, wounded, captive, or simply gave up the fight. A few did carry on, and in December 1813 Napoleon formed the optimistically titled “Polish Corps”. It consisted of the following (strength as of the 1st January 1814):

- Krakus Regiment
- 1st Uhlan Regiment
- 2nd Uhlan Regiment
- Vistula Infantry Regiment ( comprised of Vistula legion and Duchy of Warsaw survivors )
- Four batteries of foot artillery
- Battery of horse artillery
- Sapper company

There were also various cavalry units dotted around France.
Following on from Napoleon’s abdication a squadron of Guard lancers followed Napoleon into exile, with the other remaining units being disbanded or absorbed into the armies of the allies. At Waterloo there was only one single squadron of Poles, with a predominantly Polish foreign infantry regiment playing no part in the battle.

Miniature battles with Poles

The Poles make a colourful contribution to any French army. I have now used them four times on the table and for some reason they have performed heroically! OK, they always seem to get wiped out, but the damage they do to the allies is something else. Although they only got to fight in 1809 and 1813 as a national army there were large contingents at virtually every battle during the period in all theatres ranging from Spain to Moscow. Below I will endeavour to provide a basic guide to rating the Poles, as well as giving a rough guide to the uniforms.

Rating troops

My reading would suggest that the Polish troops should be a cut above the usual as found in the French armies. In order to reflect the development of the army I have split this into five distinct phases to give a feel, but this is no way written in stone, and I am sure others will have their own opinions.

1805-8

Infantry 10% veteran 80% trained 10% conscript / raw
Cavalry 10% veteran 90% trained
Artillery 50% veteran 50% trained

1809

Infantry 10% Elite 10% veteran 40% trained 40% conscript / raw
Cavalry 10% Elite 10% veteran 40% trained 40% conscript / raw
Artillery 25% veteran 50% trained 25% conscript / raw

1812

Infantry 15% Elite 25% veteran 60% trained
Cavalry 10% Elite 20% veteran 70% trained
Artillery 50% veteran 50% trained

1813

Infantry 10% Elite 50% veteran 20% trained 20% conscript / raw
Cavalry 10% Elite 30% veteran 30% trained 30% conscript / raw
Artillery 70% veteran 15% trained 15% conscript raw

1814
For this period I would rate the Poles as 50-50% Elite-Veteran.

All organisation would be as the French ( i.e. a line battalion would be 4 x fusilier companies, 1 x grenadier and 1 x Voltiguer company ) throughout.
Uniforms and uniformity

There were a number of decrees regarding uniformity concerning the Grand Duchy of Warsaw throughout the period, with the major cut-off points being 1807, 1810, and the end 1812. Beware however as the reference sources I have access to seem to conflict each other on a regular basis. My advice is to anyone painting a Polish army of the period is stick to a reference source you like and have confidence in, and ignore the rest as it will do your head in! The reasons for this are due to time past, the nature of a pre-industrial economy; and then you had the “Polish attitude”: even the French complained about the Poles and their approach to uniformity! However, as an aid, please see below a very general guide:

Infantry:

- Head wear – peaked czapka for fusilier and voltiguer, bearskin (peaked or not............) or czapka for grenadiers. Some regiments were meant to have been clothed in French uniforms, although this may be a translation problem, as the French paid for a couple of regiments but this does not necessarily mean the troops were French equipped if you get my drift.
- The czapka, and this is where the fun really starts, could be trimmed yellow, white, red for the grenadiers, or left black. Good luck on working out which regiment did what!
- Uniform coat blue with regimental facing to the collar, cuffs tails, and front of the Kurka (Polish cut jacket). Additionally there were at least two regiments with white coats, and many regiments had the habit of having different facings for each battalion.
- Trousers were either blue or white, or whatever they could get hold of. Theoretically blue for winter and white for summer.
- There was at least one other regiment that was entirely faced in yellow, and the Vistula Legion was another ball game altogether; but basically French uniform with Hungarian cuffs yellow facings and a “sun-burst” shako.

As a rule of thumb the rest of the uniform followed French conventions.

Cavalry:

- Head wear was generally a peaked czapka for uhlans, shako for hussars and chasseurs, but then you have the odd busby, peaked or not, thrown in for elite companies.
- Cuirassiers wore French armour and uniform except when they didn’t!
- Uniform colour was basically blue for uhlans or Krakus, and green for the chasseurs.
- Hussars were a colourful lot to say the least, but lack of space precludes me from an in-depth listing. Effectively a hussar uniform would have light blue, silver, and crimson prevalent.

Artillery:

- Very Russian strangely; foot artillery was green, with white overalls (in theory) in the summer, with a black shako, black facings with a red trim.
- Horse artillery was very similar with either a czapka or a busby depending on your sources. As a rule of thumb I’d go with czapka up to 1809 and a busby afterwards, but even then I am not 100% sure!
- Guns and limbers etc would be as the French – an olive’ish green.
Manufacturers guide

As can be seen from potted history and list of units the Polish army was a pretty large one, with lots of variety. Matching the real army is now possible due to the number of miniatures available, in sizes 6-28mm (and probably beyond). I offer no recommendation (other than please buy Murawski Miniatures!!! I need your support to finish the range!!) but please see below for a list of manufacturers. If I have missed anyone, apologies; no slight was intended.

6-10mm
- Adler, Baccus, Heroics & Ros, Pendragan, Magister Militum – not seen any of these in the metal but have read only good things about them all. See their websites for further information, but more than enough figures here for even a huge Polish army.

15/18mm
- Now I claim almost total ignorance here, but I have seen the AB figures and they are superb. I am reliably informed Battle Honours, Old Glory, Essex and Minifigs also supply extensive ranges of figures.

25mm
- Hinchcliffe and Minifigs offer Poles for the period, but I am unable to vouch for the breadth or accuracy of the ranges. I do have soft spot for both of these however as I grew up with them!

28mm
- Trent Miniatures produces Poles for the Haiti and earlier periods. Never seen them in the metal so unable to vouch for them I’m afraid.

- Connoisseur, Elite and Old Glory offer extensive ranges which are not to everyone’s taste, but I find them all excellent if you like the more “dramatic” poses. The ranges also appear to be extensive.

- Offensive Miniatures provides a well detailed but limited range, which I think is designed to go with their Peninsular war figures.

- Front Rank produces an excellent and extensive range. On the chunkier side, the figures are designed perhaps with the 1807-12 period in mind, and are very well equipped. If you like Front Rank you’ll love these.

- Murawski Miniatures has a large range which should be completed this year. Currently includes campaign and full dress infantry aimed at the period 1812-14, with elites in bearskins and czapka, Vistula legion, firing line, foot artillery, command, uhlans, and of course Krakus. Forthcoming releases will see infantry and uhlans for Spain, horse artillery, chasseurs, hussars and cuirassiers. Designed by Paul Hicks they are compatible with Foundry Perry / Perry figures.
In conclusion

I hope this article has given you an insight into the Poles of the Napoleonic wars. If you’d like more information on painting and collecting please don’t hesitate to contact me via the editor.

Roger Murrow.