

POLES

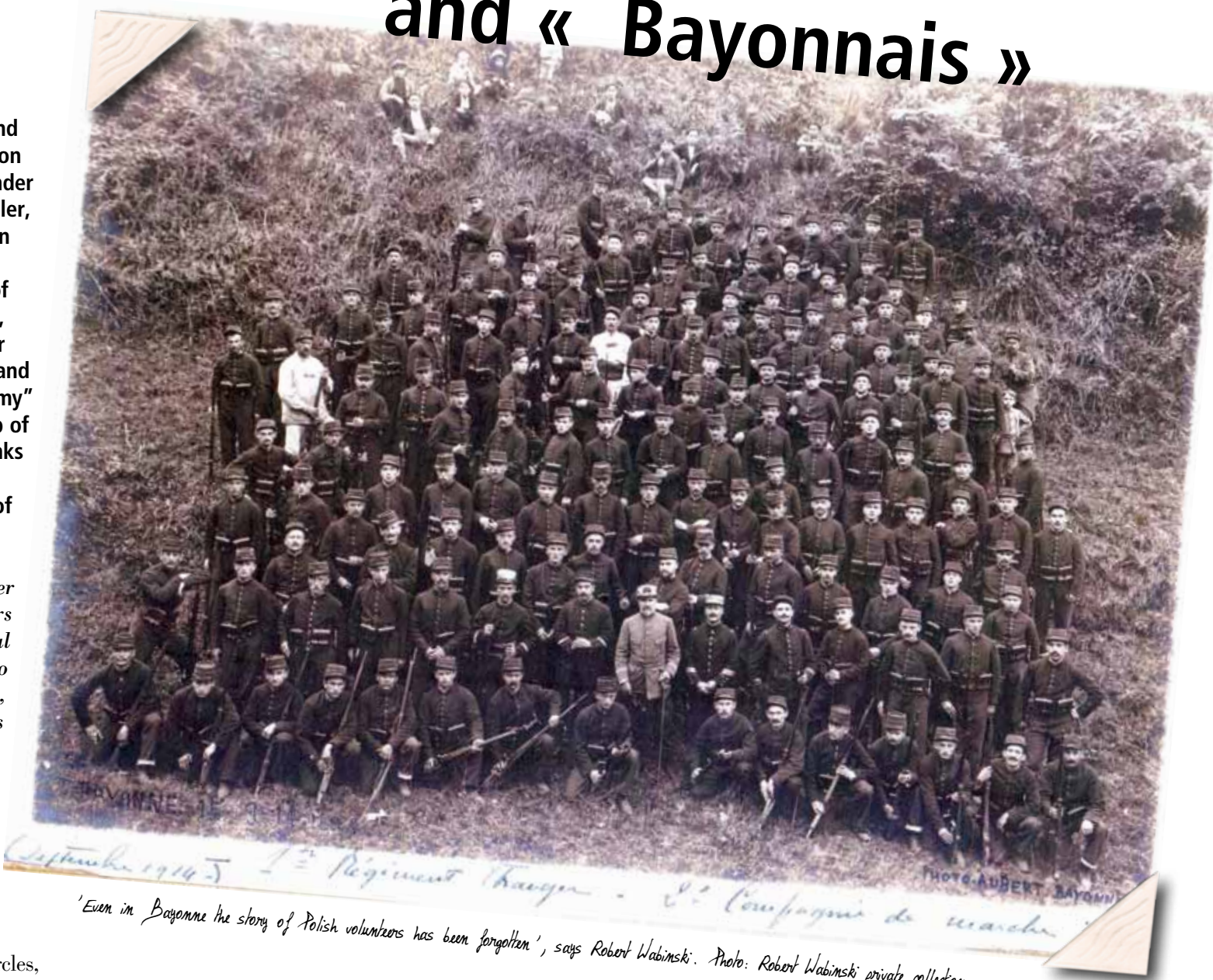
ON 4 June 1917, a decree signed by President Raymond Poincaré, ratified the creation of a Polish army on French soil. Under the command of General Jozef Haller, it would comprise over 30,000 men by the end of the conflict: Polish émigrés from America, prisoners of war, deserters from enemy armies, the few Poles living in France prior to 1914 etc. However, from 1914 and 1915 on, and before this "Blue Army" came into existence, a small group of Polish volunteers fought in the ranks of the Foreign Legion. These men entered into history by the name of "Bayonnais".

"When, on 21 August 1914, the Minister for War authorised that foreigners could join the French army, several hundred Poles made their way to enlistment offices without hesitation", explains Robert Wabinski*, who is writing a book on the "Bajonczyk" (Bayonnais in Polish) in readiness for their centenary in 2014. The first wave of volunteers, five hundred in Paris, the same number in Toulouse, and three hundred in Abbeville and Douai (made up of a mix of students, miners, labourers and aristocrats), responded to the appeals from different patriotic circles, associations and unions such as the "Sokol" and "Strzelec", in the hope of seeing the rebirth of their "motherland" which by now had been divided up between the German, Austrian and Russian empires. "The French authorities did of course have to take into account the sensitivities of Russia, an allied country, which frowned upon the formation of a Polish army in France", adds Robert Wabinski. "The volunteers were assigned to the infantry regiments of the Foreign Legion".

A detachment of four hundred men quickly made its way to the training centre in Bayonne, which would soon become the 2nd company of C battalion of the 2nd infantry regiment of the 1st Foreign, better known by the name of "2nd Foreign Infantry Regiment". Robert Wabinski also became interested in the military standards of these volunteers: "the first flag, bearing a white eagle, was

carried by Wladyslaw Szuyski, who was killed on 27 November 1914; a second was created by the painter Styka; and a third embroidered with gold thread by the women of Bayonne". After two months of training, the "Bayonnais" were subjected to their own "stations of the cross" in the Champagne region. They took part in the harsh Battle of Sillery on 22 November 1914, and then arrived in the Artois, where they suffered a slaughter on 9 May 1915 outside Arras. Tobie Aberbach was reported missing in action in Berthonval, André Adamski was killed in Mont-Saint-Éloi, André Budzinski in Berthonval, along with Henri Chocinski, who was lost in action to the north of Arras, and Guibel Goldberg, killed in the sector of Berthonval... the alphabetical list of dead and missing is a long one and ends with Edmond Wiweger and François Zawieja. On 16 June 1915, the "Bayonnais survivors"

and « Bayonnais »



'Even in Bayonne the story of Polish volunteers has been forgotten', says Robert Wabinski. Photo: Robert Wabinski private collection

attacked with bayonets to take the cemetery at Souchez. "The surviving soldiers of the division were almost completely lost". "The commitment and sacrifice of this first-rate unit was demonstrated in particular on 9 May 1915, when, placed at the head of the column attacking the "Ouvrages Blancs", it distinguished itself brilliantly in capturing enemy positions hitherto defended stubbornly, not stopping until it had fulfilled its objectives, despite very heavy losses", the citation states in the military order of the day. On 11 November 1918, Poland regained its independence. The 1920s saw a large wave of emigration to the Pas-de-Calais. The "Bayonnais" were not forgotten, however. A monument was erected in 1929 alongside the main road in Neuville-Saint-Vaast, and was officially inaugurated on 21 May 1933 by the Polish ambassador. Destroyed by the

Germans in 1940, it was subsequently rebuilt. Damaged by the storms of February 1967, it was once again reconstructed by volunteers thanks to a fund set up by the newspaper, *Narodowiec*. The monument was renovated in 1995, and provided with better signage in 2007 on the occasion of the "Year of Poland" in the Pas-de-Calais.

* Born in 1949 in Calonne-Ricouart, the son of a miner and a legionnaire, Robert Wabinski went on to study law in Lille. His career started at the Kourou space centre in French Guiana in 1975. He has spent his professional life at the National Space Research Centre, and is now working as an adviser to the Director of Human Resources in Paris. Robert Wabinski is a colonel in the French army reserve.

CZECHS and « Nazdar »

Charles Bezdicek, aged 27, a soldier in the 2nd Foreign Infantry Regiment, died for France on 9 May 1915 in La Targette, killed by enemy fire. He was a Czech hero. In the Artois, Karel Bezdicek was the standard-bearer of the "Nazdar" (translation: "Salute our success") company made up of Czechoslovak volunteers – a minority which at the time was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Bezdicek fell in the German trenches wrapped in the Czech flag – a powerful symbol indeed. Names such as Dostal, Dubisz, Houska, Kramata, Kubanek, Marek, Pribyl and Stetka, who died in the trenches of Berthonval, La Targette and Souchez, are buried in the Czechoslovak cemetery between La Targette and Souchez. At its

entrance stands a monument unveiled in 1925: "Z Volili Zemriti Za Svobodu" (They chose to die for Freedom). Examples include Josef Pultr, who was also killed on 9 May 1915 and was the Sokols' instructor during their month of training in Bayonne; and Josef Sibal, 49 years of age, who died on 10 May 1915 as a result of his war wounds, and who was the president of the Rovnost association. From the summer of 1914 onwards, the Sokols in Paris and the socialists of Rovnost had decided they would enlist if war broke out; the Czech colony in Paris (made up of artists and artisans) organised one demonstration in front of the Austro-Hungarian embassy and another on Place de la Concorde. Enlistment forms were printed in the two languages. Every able-bodied Sokol was quick to fill them in and sign them, and on 22

August they marched behind the Sokol flag to the offices of the recruitment board.

On 23 October 1914, a battalion of 250 men trained in Bayonne headed for the Champagne front with the 2nd Infantry Regiment, which was attached to the Moroccan Division. On 11 December, the first Czech legionnaire was killed. On 9 May 1915, the division went on the offensive in the Artois, resulting in eleven hours of fighting and culminating in the legion's withdrawal. Following the attacks in May and June 1915, the "Nazdar" company ceased to exist as an independent unit and its remaining troops were divided up between the various formations within the Legion's infantry regiment. In 1918, a Czechoslovak brigade was established in France, returning to its homeland in the autumn of 1919. In total, 650 Czech legionnaires perished in France during the course of the First World War.