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## Piotr Kiekiernicki - the Polish "Kamikaze" of the November Uprising (1830-1831)

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*Tomasz Strzeżek*

## PIOTR KIEKIERNICKI – THE POLISH “KAMIKAZE” OF THE NOVEMBER UPRISING (1830–1831)

On 29 November 1830, an armed struggle that went down the history as the November Uprising broke out in Warsaw, the capital city of the Kingdom of Poland which was bound by a personal union with Russia. With time, the uprising spread to include Russia's western governorates (the former territories of pre-partition Poland, today a part of Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine), posing a threat to Russia's imperial rule. It was a significant event that has even been compared to Russia's war against Napoleon in 1812. It is quite remarkable that an insurrection with such far-reaching consequences had been initiated by people who had no close connections with political and military elites and did not hold top-notch posts in the state administration or the army. The insurgents were motivated by patriotism and the determination to improve their fate. Members of the Wysocki Conspiracy who took to the streets and mobilized the army and the civilians to stage a fight against Russia had no intentions to assume power in a country that was struggling to regain its independence. They entrusted this task to the old elites which, as they hoped, would lead the nation into battle. Titled politicians and officers took control over the uprising, but they had little belief in its military success. The majority of high-ranking commanders (from major upwards) shared this opinion. Most former officers from the era of Napoleonic wars supported the uprising, but they participated in the insurrection and the war against Russia out of civic duty to their country and the nation<sup>1</sup>. Unlike younger officers and older non-commissioned officers, very few high-

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<sup>1</sup> W. Tokarz, *Armia Królestwa Polskiego (1815–1831)*, Piotrków 1917, pp. 292–293; T. Strzeżek, *Polska ofensywa wiosenna w 1831 roku. Zaprzepaszczona szansa powstania listopadowego*, Olsztyn 2002, p. 38.

ranking officers in the Polish army gave their unconditional support to the uprising. Piotr Kiekiernicki was a member of this small group of officers.

Kiekiernicki was born in 1789 to a Polish nobility family in the Wielkopolska region. He began his military career at the age of 20 by joining the third regiment of Galician-French infantry. He gained skill and experience in the armed struggle against the Austrian army which entered the Duchy of Warsaw in 1809. In July, he was awarded his first officer's rank of second lieutenant, and in 1810 he was promoted to lieutenant. In the war against Russia of 1812, Kiekiernicki served in the 15<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment of the Warsaw Duchy. He participated in the battles of Smolensk and Mozhaysk (Borodino). On 11 September, he was promoted to captain by Napoleon himself. He was transferred to the 20<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment formed in Lithuania, but he probably remained with the 15<sup>th</sup> regiment and fought in the battles of Chirikov, Voronov, Medynia and Berazino. In the 1813 campaign, Kiekiernicki participated in the battle of Leipzig (16–19 October), the largest battle of the Napoleonic era<sup>2</sup>. He joined the Polish Kingdom army<sup>3</sup> as captain and holder of the *Virtuti Militari* golden cross. He served in the 1<sup>st</sup> line infantry regiment until the outbreak of the November Uprising. In 1825, he was promoted to the rank of major, and in 1830, he was awarded a medal of honor for 20 years of "outstanding service". Kiekiernicki was a widower, and he had no children. He was close to his brother who had a son<sup>4</sup>.

Service in the Polish Kingdom army, commanded by Grand Duke Constantine (the tsar's brother), in particularly its infantry regiments, was quite an ordeal<sup>5</sup>. Kiekiernicki, an enthusiastic patriot<sup>6</sup>, found it difficult to adjust to the new reality, but he did not give up his struggle for independence. He was a close acquaintance of Walerian Łukasiński who started the National Freemasonry movement in 1819. Modeled on Masonic lodges, this organization had around 200 members. The fight for Poland's independence was not its direct goal, but it promoted the ambiguous concept of "preserving national identity". For Kiekiernicki, who was not a key member of the Freemasonry, this concept embodied all actions aiming to revive the Polish nation and

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<sup>2</sup> J. Starosta, *Piotr Kiekiernicki*, *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 12, book. 3, Kraków 1966–1967, pp. 400–401; R. Bielecki, *Słownik biograficzny oficerów powstania listopadowego*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1996, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> The Kingdom of Poland was created out of the Duchy of Warsaw at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. It was bound by a personal union with Russia (the Russian Tsar was the king of Poland).

<sup>4</sup> J. Starosta, *op. cit.*, p. 401; R. Bielecki, *op. cit.*, p. 268; *Kronika Emigracji Polskiej*, vol. 3: 1836, p. 76, Kiekiernicki bequeathed all of his funds to his nephew.

<sup>5</sup> T. Strzeżek, *Kawaleria Królestwa Polskiego w powstaniu listopadowym-mobilizacja i podstawy funkcjonowania w wojnie*, Olsztyn 2006, pp. 21–30, 45–46.

<sup>6</sup> In a suicide note of 1831, he wrote: "The vision of a torn and oppressed Country prevented me from enjoying life ever since I was a child. Everything was poisoned, I could never find my peace, and my heart was always torn by this sorry sight". *Kronika Emigracji Polskiej*, vol. 3: 1836, p. 76.

restore its full sovereignty<sup>7</sup>. There is lack of agreement on whether Kiekiernicki was a member of the Patriotic Society, a secret organization that replaced the National Freemasonry. The goal of the Patriotic Society was to reinstate Poland's independence in all three partitions by way of an uprising (in the long-term perspective and in a supporting climate on the international arena). Kiekiernicki was not tried in court with other members of the Patriotic Society (June 1827 to June 1828). The authorities were only aware of his memberships in the National Freemasonry<sup>8</sup>, and this fact undoubtedly influenced his fate. Kiekiernicki was not an active conspirator in fear of exposing his companions to the highly effective secret police. It seems highly probable that after 1828, he was a tacit supporter of a secret officers' organization created by second lieutenant Józef Zaliwski. The movement brought together lower-ranking officers and non-commissioned officers from the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> line infantry regiments<sup>9</sup>. Kiekiernicki was not an active member, but he was prepared to join the organization's ranks in the event of an uprising<sup>10</sup>. In the summer of 1830, Zaliwski and his companions joined Piotr Wysocki's Conspiracy (formed in December 1828) that sparked the armed struggle on 29 November 1830. The number of conspirators was low (around 80 on 25 November), therefore efforts were made to solicit the support of more officers within several days<sup>11</sup>. Kiekiernicki was probably one of them, and he became a fully-fledged member of the conspiracy. He represented a small group of higher-ranking officers who knew about the uprising and were willing to support it. He did not aspire to be the movement's leader: he joined the preparation process relatively late, and he lacked political ambitions. According to Szymon Askenazy, Kiekiernicki had a “passionate and tempestuous disposition”, and he was a “kind and generous soul”<sup>12</sup>. He definitely lacked the resourcefulness and tenacity of those engaged in a cult of personality (Zaliwski was an expert in this respect). He was probably more similar to Piotr Wysocki whose chief motto in life was “nothing for self, everything for the Country”. Waclaw Tokarz wrote that Kiekiernicki was a prime example of “complete selflessness, a nearly complete absence of personal ambition” and a man who “...beamed with righteousness and per-

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<sup>7</sup> Sz. Askenazy, *Lukasiński*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1929, pp. 99, 276–277, 293, 318–319; W. Bortnowski, *Luna nad Solcem 1830. Blaski i cienie nocy listopadowej*, Warszawa 1982, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Sz. Askenazy, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 316, vol. 2, pp. 30–31, 57, 450; W. Bortnowski, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> [J. Zaliwski], *Rewolucja polska 29 listopada 1830 przez ...*, Paris 1833, p. 12. Józef Zaliwski was one of the uprising's organizers. W. Tokarz, *Sprzysiężenie Wysockiego i Noc Listopadowa*, Warszawa 1980, p. 150; T. Łepkowski, *Piotr Wysocki*, Warszawa 1981, p. 43; Bortnowski, op. cit., p. 161. Zaliwski was of the opinion that members of the former organizations, including the Freemasonry and the Patriotic Society, “never initiated any action on their own”.

<sup>10</sup> [J. Zaliwski], op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> T. Łepkowski, op. cit., pp. 47, 62; W. Bortnowski, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Sz. Askenazy, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 31.

sonal integrity that won him the trust of young people...”<sup>13</sup>. Kiekiernicki handled his subordinates, officers and privates with great skill<sup>14</sup>. He became renowned for his bravery and courage already before the November Uprising. Ignacy Prądzyński, a distinguished staff officer and the author of operation plans, claimed that Kiekiernicki’s courage bordered on audacity. Kiekiernicki was a complete stranger to panic attacks which paralyze the best soldiers. According to Prądzyński, Kiekiernicki was one of the bravest and the “most singular” soldiers in the Polish army. The latter should not be associated with the fact that Kiekiernicki was a widower, but it is a reflection on his willingness to fight and take action, traits that were not very common among higher-ranking Polish officers during the uprising<sup>15</sup>. Wacław Tokarz argued that Kiekiernicki was “one of those intelligent and quick-witted officers among whom the Union [Wysocki’s Conspiracy – T.S.] should search for a leader that the uprising was in dire need of”. Tokarz referred to Kiekiernicki as a “very talented” man of “uncommon valor”<sup>16</sup>. He based his judgment on Kiekiernicki’s achievements during and before the uprising.

Józef Zaliwski, the originator of the plan to break up and take control over the Russian army in Warsaw, entrusted Kiekiernicki with a very important task. As the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> infantry regiment, Kiekiernicki was to seize the bridges on the Vistula River, the powder magazine (ammunition storage) in Warsaw’s district of Praga<sup>17</sup> and secure Praga on the side of Modlin which was occupied by Russian troops. By seizing those positions, Kiekiernicki would prevent the Russian army from retreating east from Warsaw. Kiekiernicki performed his duties outstandingly. He supplied ammunition from the captured powder magazine to the insurgents in Warsaw<sup>18</sup>. Józef Zaliwski claimed that Kiekiernicki “obeyed the orders with the utmost diligence – and this is what saved us all”<sup>19</sup>. This is quite possible as Kiekiernicki was highly esteemed by his soldiers. The indictment against the

<sup>13</sup> W. Tokarz, *Sprzysiężenie...*, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, Kraków 1909, vol. 1, p. 451, vol. 3, p. 86. Henryk Dembiński, who fought by Kiekiernicki’s side, remarked that when it came to personal courage, Kiekiernicki “had no equal”. He added that Kiekiernicki was a fearless officer ready to “**sacrifice himself and his army for the mission**”. This observation was consistent with Kiekiernicki’s character. H. Dembiński, *Pamiętniki o powstaniu w Polsce 1830–1831*, vol. 1, Kraków 1877, pp. 129, 200.

<sup>16</sup> W. Tokarz, *Sprzysiężenie...*, pp. 150, 208.

<sup>17</sup> Praga – district of Warsaw on the right bank of the Vistula.

<sup>18</sup> *Akt oskarżenia w sprawie przeciwko osobom oddanym pod najwyższy sąd kryminalny w Królestwie Polskim w zarzucie spełnienia zbrodni, wyłączonych od ogólnego przebaczenia, jakie Najjaśniejszy Cesarz Wszech Rosseyi Król Polski itd w dniu 20 października / 1 listopada R. 1831 poddanym swym w Królestwie Polskim mającym udział w rokoszu z roku 1830 i 1831 najtąskawiej udzielić raczył wraz z summariuszem dowodów i konkluzjami prokuratora przy tymże sądzie, (criminal indictment act), Warszawa 1834, pp. 119–120; W. Tokarz, *Sprzysiężenie...*, pp. 148, 206–208.*

<sup>19</sup> [J. Zaliwski], *op. cit.*, p. 25.

insurgents quotes the words that were used by Kiekiernicki to motivate them for battle. He urged his soldiers to show determination and perseverance not only when fighting for the capital city<sup>20</sup>, but also in the war against Russia because “if our enemy regains its position, a much greater evil awaits us”<sup>21</sup>.

When troops were mobilized for the war against Russia, Kiekiernicki was put in charge of the third battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> line infantry regiment. Contrary to the first two battalions, the third unit, formed in early December 1830, comprised dismissed officers who had been redrafted into the army as well as volunteers who were novices in the battle field. The latter accounted for around a third of Kiekiernicki’s soldiers. While sluggish officers who had fallen out of military practice detracted from the reputation of the third battalion, the 1<sup>st</sup> line infantry regiment was a shining example of military art. Kiekiernicki quickly turned it into a model instrument of war. Kiekiernicki’s battalion was one of the first to join the regiment already on 7 January 1831<sup>22</sup>.

The war that broke out when the Russian army of more than 100,000 men invaded the Kingdom of Poland (5-6 February 1831) made Kiekiernicki famous. His greatest military accomplishments included the battle of Warsaw (19-25 February 1831), comprising a series of battles that had started in Wawer (19 February), Olszynka Grochowska (20 February), Białołęka (24-25 February) and the largest scene of armed conflict, the battle of Grochów (25 February). On 19 February, the 1<sup>st</sup> line infantry regiment defended the outskirts of Olszynka Grochowska<sup>23</sup>, and put up a bloody fight to maintain this territory on 20 February. In a report for the commander-in-chief, General Jan Krukowiecki mentioned Kiekiernicki as one of the officers who had made “an outstanding contribution” to the cause. The regiment’s commander spared him no praise. Stanisław Barzykowski, a representative of the government, erroneously placed Kiekiernicki on the list of officers who had been wounded and captured by the enemy<sup>24</sup>.

The situation on the main front line in Olszynka Grochowska near Warsaw stabilized on 19 and 20 February. The two armies<sup>25</sup> found themselves in

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<sup>20</sup> *Akt oskarżenia*, p. 119, “When I give an order, you shall obey it. This is the revolution, and you are under my command”, “A day came for every Pole to shed blood for his Country [...] This is the day of bloodshed, **we will fight till our last drop of blood**, we will crush the Muscovites, and when the Lithuanian Guard advances towards the new bridge, we will shoot it and attack it with our bayonets”.

<sup>21</sup> *Akt oskarżenia...*, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> J. Ziółek, *Mobilizacja sił zbrojnych na lewobrzeżu Wisły 1830–1831*, Lublin 1973, pp. 97–98.

<sup>23</sup> A suburban wood, the key to Polish defensive positions.

<sup>24</sup> On 20 February, the 1<sup>st</sup> line infantry regiment lost around 232 soldiers, around 9% of the forces counted on 18 February. Library of the National Ossoliński Institute in Wrocław [hereinafter referred to as Oss.], microfilm 89a, No. 19; manuscript 3518/I, p. 28; *Źródła do dziejów wojny polsko-rosyjskiej 1830–1831*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1931, pp. 380–382, 394–396; S. Barzykowski, *Historia powstania listopadowego*, vol. 2, Poznań 1883, p. 334.

<sup>25</sup> On 19 February, the Polish army was 45,000 soldiers and 143 cannons strong. The Russian army had 72,000 soldiers and 204 cannons. W. Majewski, *Grochów 1831*, Warszawa 1982, p. 146.

a face-to-face situation. Polish officers identified Russian army's weak point, namely the right wing comprising units of the 6<sup>th</sup> infantry corps commanded by General Grigory Rosen. The key to Russia's position was Dąbrowa Góra, a range of sandy hills several hundred meters away from Olszynka Grochowska which remained in Polish hands. Colonel Maciej Rybiński, commander of Kiekiernicki's regiment, and Lieutenant-Colonel Ignacy Prądzyński presented General Józef Chłopicki with a plan of staging an infantry attack on the right wing of the Russian army with the aim of pushing it to the south. Chłopicki, formally only an advisor to Commander-in-Chief General Michał Radziwiłł, but in practice – the actual commander of the Polish army (partially accredited on 22 February 1831), rejected the plan on grounds of excessive risk<sup>26</sup>. It was then that Kiekiernicki decided to propose his daring plan (Appendix 1) directly to General Radziwiłł<sup>27</sup>.

Kiekiernicki asked for troops comprising of 500 bravest soldiers and 15 lower-rank officers – volunteers ready to sacrifice their lives for the country. Each of them would be equipped with arms corresponding to their respective military rank, including a broadsword for each private and a couple of pistols for every officer. The soldiers were to be provided with special nails and hammers for disabling Russian cannons. Kiekiernicki was also hoping for some spoils, and he requested 50 artillerymen and several horse convoys for pulling cannons. The troops were to be backed by 150 Scythemen<sup>28</sup> and a company of infantry rocketeers commanded by Captain Karol Skalski who would illuminate the battle field with Congreve rockets<sup>29</sup>, causing havoc among the enemy's soldiers and horses. Kiekiernicki wanted to inspect Russian positions in the company of two officers and gather the troops near Olszynka Grochowska at night. The main target of his night escapade were Russian positions in Dąbrowa Góra<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 1).

Kiekiernicki was hoping to accomplish two tasks during the escapade: to capture or damage (by nailing down) Russian cannons and to cause havoc in the Russian camp. He knew that the operation would take many lives, but he was willing to repeat the escapade with those who survived<sup>31</sup>. Volunteer service and the willingness to sacrifice their lives for the country create a parallel between the Polish soldiers of 1831 and the Japanese kamikaze soldiers of World War II.

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<sup>26</sup> Oss., manuscript 3518/I, pp. 29–30; [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, vol. 1, pp. 445–451; W. Tokarz, *Wojna polsko-rosyjska 1830 i 1831*, Warszawa 1993, p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, vol. 1, p. 451.

<sup>28</sup> The soldiers of the new infantry regiments were armed with scythes. Rifles were in short supply in the Polish army until the end of the war.

<sup>29</sup> Congreve rockets – incendiary and bombarding rockets (with bullets and bombs).

<sup>30</sup> I. Prądzyński, *Pamiętnik historyczny i wojskowy*, Petersburg 1898, p. 45, “a hill directly opposite our Olszynka”; [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, 1, p. 451.



Fig. 1. Region of Olszynka Grochowska and Dąbrowa Góra

Source: L. Mierosławski, *Powstanie narodu polskiego w roku 1830 i 1831*, vol. 1, Paris 1845.

Chłopiński, who had a decisive voice in military operations, did not accept Kiekiernicki's plan<sup>32</sup>, probably deeming it even more insane than Prądzyński's and Rybiński's proposal. Despite the above, Kiekiernicki's bold scheme contributed to his reputation of an energetic man who was capable of greatness<sup>33</sup>.

On 25 February 1831, during the battle of Grochów, Kiekiernicki defended a strategic position in Ząbki between two points occupied by the Polish army which were separated by a distance of several kilometers. He defended the “middle gate” through which the Russians could enter the district of Praga by separating Polish troops, attacking the army's rear and flank in Olszynka Grochowska and Grochów. According to Ignacy Prądzyński, Kiekiernicki had been waging a “lost battle” from the beginning<sup>34</sup>. He was to guard his position with the aid of an infantry battalion, 50 cavalymen of the Krakusi regiment and a horse artillery battery. When the Russian infantry charged, Kiekiernicki's battalion lasted two hours in “dense fire” near a bridge by the road to Ząbki, repulsing the attack of the enemy's infantry backed by artillery and cavalry. He received support from an artillery unit,

<sup>31</sup> Oss., microfilm 89a, No. 20.

<sup>32</sup> [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, vol. 1, p. 451.

<sup>33</sup> When spurring his soldiers to fight in an order of 25 February, General Jan Krukowiecki took into account Kiekiernicki's “resilience”, i.e. his energy and courage. *Źródła do dziejów...*, vol. 1, p. 412.

<sup>34</sup> [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, vol. 1, p. 486; W. Chrzanowski, *Opisanie bitwy grochowskiej*, Kraków 1917, p. 68.



but Polish forces were outnumbered by the enemy. When the Russians made a repeated attempt to take over the bridge, Kiekiernicki dismounted the structure and ordered a retreat. He did it with great reluctance, and it took much convincing to prevent him from launching a direct bayonet attack on the much stronger Russian regiment approaching the bridge. Kiekiernicki finally retreated, but he did so without hurrying, as his priority was to safeguard the army. In his report, General Krukowiecki wrote that Kiekiernicki “put up a courageous fight in Ząbki in the face of a much greater army. He changed positions twice to gain advantage, and he ordered a retreat only when commanded to do so by General Umiński”. General Jan Nepomucen Umiński remarked on Kiekiernicki’s perseverance and determination<sup>35</sup>. It was probably those traits of character that led to Kiekiernicki’s dispute with General Jan Weyssenhoff (commander of the entire cavalry in the uprising) who insisted that Kiekiernicki vacate the threatened position because his determination jeopardized the safety of the cavalry unit from Umiński’s corps<sup>36</sup>.

The feud with a higher-ranking officer did not hinder Kiekiernicki’s military career. His ability to defend a seemingly hopeless position was duly recognized. His superiors expected Kiekiernicki to give a similar display of courage and determination in defending the fortifications of Praga which remained under Polish control after the army had retreated to the left bank of the Vistula. On 26 February 1831, the new Commander-in-Chief of the Polish army, general Jan Skrzynecki, made Kiekiernicki the commander of Praga’s garrison (comprising two infantry battalions)<sup>37</sup>. There are no surviving records to indicate the term of Kiekiernicki’s post, but it enabled him to expand his knowledge of the vast territories in the outskirts of Praga which was used by the command. On 31 March, Kiekiernicki commanded the vanguard of the Polish forces (General Rybiński’s infantry division) which moved north through Ząbki to detour General Fyodor Geismar’s troops in Wawer and Gocławek. In the second battle of Wawer which initiated the Polish spring offensive<sup>38</sup>, Kiekiernicki attempted to cut off the Russian forces’ route back to the east. He was unable to surround the enemy completely, but his soldiers inflicted serious damage on Geismar’s troops. Kiekiernicki captured an entire regiment of Russian infantry with two companies. The division’s commander later reported on the bravery of Kiekiernicki’s battalion. Kiekiernicki’s cold-blooded stance and determination once again won him the acclaim

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<sup>35</sup> *Źródła do dziejów...*, vol. 1, pp. 413–414, 416–418.

<sup>36</sup> J. Lewiński, *Pamiętniki z 1831 roku*, Poznań 1895, p. 22; [J. Weyssenhoff], *Pamiętniki generała...*, Warszawa 1904, p. 228.

<sup>37</sup> Order of 26 February 1831.

<sup>38</sup> T. Strzeżek, *Polska ofensywa wiosenna w 1831 roku. Zaprzepaszczona szansa powstania listopadowego*, Olsztyn 2002. The Polish offensive took the lives of nearly 20,000 Russian soldiers (including 12,500 prisoners). The Poles captured 13 cannons and vast quantities of military equipment.

of military command. According to Maciej Rybiński's report, at one point, Kiekiernicki's unit suddenly faced three Russian infantry battalions. Kiekiernicki stopped his soldiers "as if to reconnoiter his situation and the threat", after which he rapidly charged the enemy's first battalion, breaking it up before proceeding to the remaining units<sup>39</sup>. In his report, Rybiński not only proclaimed Kiekiernicki to be one of the most distinguished officers, but he also motioned with the Commander-in-Chief to reward and promote Kiekiernicki for his efforts<sup>40</sup>. Duke Adam Czartoryski, Chairman of the Polish National Uprising Government, made a similar request. In a letter to Skrzynecki of 4 April 1831, he pointed to Kiekiernicki's remarkable achievements on 31 March, adding that such a great man should not be forgotten<sup>41</sup>. Kiekiernicki's fame and reputation of one of the bravest officers in the Polish infantry continued to grow<sup>42</sup>. After the battle of Wawer, he pursued the disintegrated corps of General Rosen. He fought in the battle of Czarna<sup>43</sup>, and he attempted to take control over the crossing on the Liwiec River near Liw<sup>44</sup>. The latter episode indicates that Kiekiernicki had the reputation of a man capable of performing special missions. His task was to destroy bridges on the Liwiec River, including near Liw. The Russian guard corps occupying territories north of the Bug River could use those bridges to attack the flank and the rear of the Polish army along the road from Warsaw to Brześć Litewski. Kiekiernicki set out on the mission with great determination. He was ready to sacrifice himself and his unit to safeguard the Polish army<sup>45</sup>. But this time, the situation did not demand such a great sacrifice. When on the night of 3 April, Kiekiernicki's infantry unit stormed Liw ready to charge the enemy with their bayonets, they woke up colonel Henryk Dembiński's uhlans who had captured Liw and the river crossing a day earlier. According to reports, a fratricidal fight broke out as the parties were unable to recognize one another in the dark<sup>46</sup>. Kiekiernicki had every right to expect the

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<sup>39</sup> Oss., microfilm 89c, No. 179; manuscript 3518/I, p. 58; T. Strzeżek, *Polska ofensywa...*, pp. 96–101.

<sup>40</sup> Oss., microfilm 89c, No. 179.

<sup>41</sup> *Źródła do dziejów...*, vol. 2, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> The cavalry also had its hero – General Ludwik Kicki, referred to as the “Polish Ajax” or the second Bayard. T. Strzeżek, *Bitwa pod Domanicami 10 kwietnia 1831 roku – epizod z dziejów kawalerii polskiej w powstaniu listopadowym*, in: *Czyn zbrojny w dziejach narodu polskiego. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Januszowi Wojtasikowi w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, Siedlce 2004, p. 157.

<sup>43</sup> Oss., microfilm 89c, No. 179; T. Strzeżek, *Polska ofensywa...*, p. 128.

<sup>44</sup> T. Strzeżek, *Zapomniane bitwy powstania listopadowego. Zmagania o przeprawę pod Liwem w lutym i pierwszej dekadzie kwietnia 1831 roku*, *Echa Przeszłości*, 2010, issue No. 11, p. 180.

<sup>45</sup> H. Dembiński, op. cit., p. 129, “unaware of the forces he would have to face, this fearless officer made a decision that was fully consistent with his character: **to sacrifice himself, with the entire regiment if need be, for the mission**. He wanted to charge the bridge and destroy it, even if he were to leave a greater force behind”.

<sup>46</sup> H. Dembiński, op. cit., p. 128; T. J. Chamski, *Opis krótki lat upłynionych*, Warszawa 1989, p. 394.

enemy when he entered a territory that had not been purged of Russian cavalry. He was keen on destroying all bridges instantly, but Dembiński finally convinced him to delay his plan for several hours. Kiekiernicki formed a special unit that took over the town of Węgrów across the Liwiec River where the Russian operated a supplies warehouse and a hospital. On 4 April, he reunited with the Polish army, bringing with him 240 prisoners<sup>47</sup>. Kiekiernicki was highly rewarded for his efforts in the November Uprising. In an order of 6 April 1831, the Commander-in-Chief promoted Kiekiernicki to colonel (omitting the rank of lieutenant-colonel!) and put him in command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> rifles regiment and, temporarily, the infantry brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> division. This was an extraordinary career leap, even in an uprising situation (Henryk Dembiński earned an even faster promotion)<sup>48</sup>. Kiekiernicki did not remain in the regiment's command for long. He did not rest on laurels in the following months of war. Having returned from Liw, he was directly commissioned for another serious mission. While the Polish army was struggling against the reinforced auxiliary units of General Rosen's 6<sup>th</sup> corps, Kiekiernicki formed a cordon securing the operation in the south<sup>49</sup>. When the Russians started an offensive on 26 April, Kiekiernicki fought in the battle of Mińsk Mazowiecki. He defended the town for two hours, personally leading his soldiers in a series of bayonet attacks<sup>50</sup>. On 19 May, the Polish troops were ordered to take Łomża, and Kiekiernicki was summoned to accompany General Antoni Giełgud on the mission. The operation was commanded by General Henryk Dembiński. Kiekiernicki, who led one of the three columns, assured Dembiński that he would be the first to advance on Łomża<sup>51</sup>. He did not keep his promise. Giełgud was an inept commander who was unable to harness his officers' talent and enthusiasm. The general's gross incompetence was further revealed during the mission to Lithuania. The cholera epidemic which reached Polish territory with the Russian army took a deadly toll. Kiekiernicki had contracted the disease probably already before the battle of Rajgród of 29 May 1831<sup>52</sup>. Despite his condition, he continued to be charged with responsible tasks. In the company of two infantry units, he defended the rear of the Polish corps that had advanced into Lithuania. He was later accused of retreating from Suwałki too rapidly without securing recruits and funds for the corps<sup>53</sup>. The disease reached its

<sup>47</sup> T. Strzeżek, *Zapomniane bitwy...*, p. 180.

<sup>48</sup> Order of 6 April 1831; H. Dembiński, op. cit., p. 200, Kiekiernicki was "appointed to and then dismissed from the post of commander in a spur of the moment".

<sup>49</sup> Oss., microfilm 89d, No. 261, 262, 291; *Źródła do dziejów...*, vol. 2, pp. 118, 129; T. Strzeżek, *Polska ofensywa...*, pp. 169, 176, 182, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Oss., microfilm 89a, No. 571.

<sup>51</sup> *Źródła do dziejów...*, vol. 3, pp. 44–45; H. Dembiński, op. cit., pp. 200, 251.

<sup>52</sup> His regiment had already been placed in the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Adam Wolski (formally from 13 June). A.Z. *Wojna na Litwie w roku 1831*, Kraków 1913, p. 51.

<sup>53</sup> [J. Szymanowski], *Pamiętniki jenerała...*, Lviv 1898, p. 127; [I. Prądzyński], *Pamiętniki generała...*, vol. 3, p. 86.

peak in early June, and Kiekiernicki probably left the army<sup>54</sup>. He was restored to service in the last days of June. General Dembiński put him in charge of the defense of the Vilya River near Kaunas. Kiekiernicki also organized an infantry brigade whose units were much less experienced than the members of his old army. Kiekiernicki assumed his duties on the night of 27 June, and on the following day, Kaunas was attacked by the vanguard of a massive Russian regiment<sup>55</sup>. It seems that Kiekiernicki failed to obey Dembiński's orders and decided to defend Kaunas. His motives remain unclear. Kiekiernicki's decision has been attributed to weakness resulting from disease, but knowing his character, excessive courage could have blunted his reason. The Russians quickly defeated the Polish insurgents, and Kiekiernicki was captured together with 32 officers and some 600 soldiers. He could have escaped, but he gave his horse to Emilia Plater, the “Polish Valkyrie” and “Amazon” who later became the symbol of Polish women's fight for independence<sup>56</sup>.

Kiekiernicki shared the fate of thousands of Polish insurgents, and he was deported to Slobodskoy (Слободской), 800 km east of Moscow. He committed suicide in May 1832, leaving behind a note in which he explained the reasons for his drastic decision (Appendix 2). Death, in whose face he looked in the battles of Warsaw and Liw, finally caught up with him nearly 2,000 km away from Poland, on distant Russian territory.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Piotr Kiekiernicki's plan of 23 February 1831<sup>57</sup>

#### *Plan*

*As it is my intention to eradicate the enemy from our beloved Country, I have the honor of proposing the following plan to the Commander-in-Chief*

*1<sup>o</sup> I would like to request a unit of 500 bravest soldiers who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the Country. – 15 lower-ranking officers.*

*2<sup>o</sup> The unit has to be provided with nails, hammers or [hatchets?] for nailing down the cannons.*

*3<sup>tho</sup> At night, those courageous men will gather and await my command in Lasek Olszowy where the battle was fought the day before yesterday. Soldiers will leave*

<sup>54</sup> S. Barzykowski, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 262; A.Z, *Wojna na Litwie...*, p. 84.

<sup>55</sup> Kiekiernicki was in charge of around 1200 poorly trained and armed soldiers. The Russian regiment under General Malinovsky's command which attacked Kaunas was 2,000 men and 6 cannons strong. It was the vanguard of General Khilkov's army of 15,300 soldiers.

<sup>56</sup> *Zbiór pamiętników do powstania Litwy*, Paris 1835, pp. 227–228; *Pamiętniki Polskie*, vol. 4, Paris 1845, pp. 47–48; [I. Domejko], *Pamiętniki...* (1831–1838), Kraków 1908, pp. 26–30; H. Dembiński, op. cit., p. 304; S. Barzykowski, op. cit., vol. 4, pp. 263–264; F. R. Sokulski, *W kraju i nad Bosforem*, Wrocław 1951, pp. 12–13; R. O. Spazier, *Historia powstania narodu polskiego w roku 1830 i 1831*, vol. 3, Paris 1833, pp. 133–134.

<sup>57</sup> Oss., microfilm 89a, No. 20.