

Germany Attacks Poland from 1

The final order went out at 4:00 pm on August 31st to invade Poland at 4:45 am on September 1st of 1939. The invasion was preceded by numerous German border provocations and acts of diversions (e.g. at radio station at Gliwice/Gleiwitz, Gdańsk, Jabłonków).

The invading force was composed of five armies and reserves (14 Infantry, 1 Panzer and 2 Mountain Divisions), all under command of General Walther von Brauchitsch. Germans attacked from three directions - Silesia / Moravia and Slovakia, Western Pomerania and East Prussia.

All three attacks were directed mainly towards the capitol of Poland - Warsaw and destruction of the Polish forces west of the Vistula River. In total, German forces included some 1,850,000 soldiers, over 3,100 tanks and 10,000 artillery pieces along with 2,085 airplanes (grouped in two air fleets - Luftflotte). An attacking force also included Kriegsmarine "East" Group, which supported ground units and faced the Polish Navy.

The attacking force also held an advantage by being able to attack Poland from three directions at once. Germans also had a well-established spy network and got help from many ethnic Germans living in Poland. Germans very well knew the Polish rail and road network as being the ones who built it.

The defending Polish force was composed of seven armies (Modlin - General Krukowicz-Przedzimirski, Pomorze - General Bortnowski, Poznań - General Kutrzeba, Łódź - General Rommel, Kraków - General Szilling, Lublin - General Piskor, and Karpaty - General Fabrycy), and a single operational group (Narew - General Młot-Fijałkowski) and reserves (single army - Prusy - General Dab-Biernacki and three operational groups - Wyszaków, Tarnów and Kutno - all partially formed). All armed forces were under command of Marshal Edward Smigly-Rydz. The Polish Army fielded some 39 Infantry Divisions, 11 Elite Cavalry Brigades, 3 Mountain Brigades and 2 Armored-Motorized Brigades along with other units. The Łódź, Kraków and Karpaty Army had 241 tanks and 32 armored cars. Pomorze, Poznań, Modlin and 4 operational groups had 234 tanks and 52 armored cars. Reserve formations had some 185 tanks.

The Polish Army was not yet fully mobilized and unprepared for war, as according to the defence plan - Z (Zachód - West). Poles responded to German attacks on a 1,600 kilometres front, attempting to contain the invading force also to counterattack and protect industrial centers. Polish planners correctly predicted directions of the German attacks but knew that they could only delay them in order to allow its Allies to act. During the course of the campaign, additional army (Warszawa - General Rommel) and independent operational group (Polesie - General Kleeberg) was formed. In total, Polish forces included some 1,000,000 soldiers (due to the incomplete mobilization, which started on August 31st and was to increase in size to 1,350,000), some 900 tanks and 4300 artillery pieces along with some 435 airplanes. Only part of the Polish Navy under Admiral Świrski was available as most of the fleet was ordered to leave for England. The main role of the remaining Polish Navy was to co-operate with the defenders of Gdynia, Oksywie, Westerplatte and Hel, as well as to protect shipping lanes to Sweden, Estonia and Finland. Only a small percentage of Polish equipment was modern, because in 1936, Poland began the process of reorganization and rearmament. The Polish army lacked motorized transport and relied on foot infantry and horse drawn transport. In addition, the Polish army was not fully mobilized and was surrounded by the enemy from three sides along a 3,000 kilometers long frontier.

On September 1st and 2nd, the Polish Army was already involved in heavy fighting in Pomerania, while retreating eastwards in an attempt to establish a line of defense to delay the invaders. On September 3rd, German forces cut the "Polish Corridor". On the same day, England and France declared war on Germany but didn't take any serious action to directly help Poland. Polish forces made up of foot

infantry were unable to fall back and establish defensive lines being constantly chased and outpaced by German motorized and Panzer units. Many Polish units and even armies were surrounded and destroyed, while attempting to defend or withdraw. The Polish High Command realized as early as September 5th that the situation was critical and there was no hope without immediate help of its Allies. Many units were cut-off but continued fighting. On September 6th, Germans entered Kraków after forcing the Kraków Army to withdraw eastwards following the danger of being encircled from the north. On the same day, after heavy fighting, Piotrków Trybunalski surrendered after the failure of the Polish plan to counterattack with a not yet fully mobilized Prusy Army. On September 7, Polish forces surrendered at Westerplatte after inflicting heavy losses on the Germans. On September 8th, Germans reached Warsaw. On September 9th, the bloodiest and bitter battle of the entire campaign began. The Battle of Bzura (under General Tadeusz Kutrzeba) was a Polish counteroffensive directed to protect Warsaw and took place in the area of Kutno, Łowicz and Sochaczew. It was executed by the Pomorze and Poznań Armies, both being in danger of being surrounded by the German 8th Army.

At first, the Poles were successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the German forces due to the element of surprise. The Polish Army managed to push the Germans back but could not maintain the momentum due to a low supply of food and ammunition. Again, the speed of the German units made further operations impossible and by September 16th, the Germans began pushing the Polish Army towards Warsaw. The battle ended on September 20th with the total destruction of the Polish forces involved, although it delayed the capitulation of Warsaw. The Battle of Bzura involved 18 German divisions from the 4th, 8th and 10th Army with air support against two Polish Armies. A small number of Polish units broke through and fought their way out and reached Warsaw. On September 10th, the Germans entered Poznań after the Poznań Army withdrew from the city. Following September 18th, the largest tank versus tank engagement took place near Tomaszów Lubelski, where some 80 Polish tankettes and tanks met in combat with German tanks.

The German 4th Panzer Division closed in on Warsaw on September 7th. The First German attack on Warsaw took place on September 9th but until September 24th, the Polish defenders successfully rejected all attacks. On September 25th, Germans began ground and aerial bombardment of the city and on September 25th to 27th, they unsuccessfully attempted to storm the city. On September 28th, Warsaw capitulated because of a lack of supplies. From September 10th to 29th, the Modlin Fortress (under General Wiktor Thommee) was also unsuccessfully attacked by the Germans, until its capitulation on September 29th, because of the lack of supplies.

On Sunday, September 17th, Lublin surrendered to the Germans. On the same day at 4.00 am, the Red Army invaded Poland from the east to "liberate and protect" Belorussians and Ukrainians living in the Eastern Poland from their "Polish Masters." This invasion came as a surprise and made regrouping of the remaining Polish forces an impossible task. **The Soviet invasion was part of Ribbentrop-Molotov pact signed on August 23rd of 1939, which included a non-aggression and trade agreement, and a secret protocol that provided for a German-Soviet partition of Poland and cleared the way for the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States. The Soviet invasion force was made up of two fronts - General Timoszenko's Ukrainians and General Kowalów's Belorussians. Both fronts consisted of 1.5 million soldiers, 6,191 tanks, 1,800 airplanes and 9,140 artillery pieces.** After heavy fighting, on September 18th, the Soviets captured Wilno, followed by Grodno and Lwów on September 22nd, reaching the Bug River on September 23rd. The Polish High Command ordered not to engage the Red Army except in the case of disarming and detaining by the Soviets. Unfortunately, the order didn't reach all

units. **At first, the Soviets were seen by both the Polish Army and population as coming to help them fight the Germans and were not any opposition at all, but it was quickly realized that the Soviets were also invaders and desperate fighting took place. The Soviets halted at a line running from East Prussia down to the Bug River.**

At night on September 18th, the Polish President and High Command along with a single battalion equipped with 1 tank along with other units entered Romania, where they were interned. **On September 18th, Germans and Soviets met in Breść nad Bugiem and exchanged "greetings."** On October 2nd, the Polish defenders of Hel (under Rear Admiral Unrug) capitulated, while the last battle of the Polish campaign took place on October 2nd to 5th - the Battle of Kock (Independent Operational Group "Polesie" under the command of General Franciszek Kleeberg). On Friday, October 6th of 1939, the last Polish troops capitulated.

German armored units included 7 Panzer Divisions, 4 Light Divisions and 4 Motorized Infantry Divisions. The German Panzer force as of September 1st of 1939 had 2,268 light tanks and 309 medium tanks. In addition, there were 215 command tanks and 202 ex-Czech armored vehicles. There were some 308 heavy armored cars, 718 light armored cars, along with 68 medium armored personnel carriers.

The Polish Army used a variety of vehicles, foreign and license built. Those included: 574 tankettes (light reconnaissance tanks), 102 obsolete light tanks, 132 light tanks, 38 6-ton light tanks, 51-light tanks and approximately 100 armored cars. In addition, the Polish Army operated 11 armored trains (4 more improvised trains were made during the campaign). The Polish Army's tanks were grouped in 3 Light Tank Battalions and 5 Light Tank Companies, and 2 Light Tank companies in Warsaw Defense). Tankettes served with Infantry Divisions, Cavalry Brigades and Independent units (companies and platoons) attached to larger units. In addition, Poland had a single - 10th Mechanized Brigade commanded by Colonel Stanisław Maczek (future commander of the 1st Polish Armored Division) and single Warsaw Armored-Motorized Brigade commanded by Colonel Stefan Rowecki (eventually, first commander of the Polish Home Army which was being formed).

Polish light tanks and tankettes were the first opponents for the German Panzers. Patriotic but outnumbered, Polish tank crews with their mostly outclassed equipment fought bravely and managed to destroy a number of enemy vehicles, while defending their homeland from both Germans and Soviets.

The Polish Campaign is surrounded by numerous myths such as the destruction of Polish Air force in the opening hours of the invasion and Polish Cavalry charges against German armored units. Both myths are creations of German and even Italian propaganda and are very far from the truth. The Polish cavalry was active during the campaign and acted as a horse mounted infantry. One of the most successful cavalry charges took place at Krojanty, where elements of the 18th Uhlan Regiment attacked and destroyed a German infantry battalion only to be counterattacked by a German armored unit. Uhlans attempted to withdraw and suffered heavy losses. This event led to the story of Polish cavalry

charges on panzers. The Polish Air Force was deployed at numerous airfields and although numerically inferior and partially obsolete was very active during the course of the campaign (e.g. over Warsaw). Polish pilots shot down in combat over 137 enemy planes. Polish cavalry brigades never charged tanks with their sabers or lances as they were equipped with anti-tank 37 mm Bofors and anti-tank guns (that could penetrate 26 mm armor at 600m at 30 degrees). The cavalry brigades were in the process of being reorganized into motorized brigades.

German casualties (8,082 to 10,572 killed, 27,278 to 30,322 wounded and 3,404 to 5,029 missing) were very low compared to Polish casualties (66,300 killed, 133,700 wounded and 420,000 taken prisoner). Poles lost 327 out of their 435 airplanes in combat, while 98 flew to Romania. In addition, 26,000 civilians were killed during the fighting. Germans lost some 993 to 1,000 armored fighting vehicles (mainly destroyed by anti-tank guns), 370 to 400 artillery pieces, 697 to 1,300 airplanes (damaged and destroyed) along with 11,000 motor vehicles. According to the German sources only 231 tanks and 5 command tanks were completely lost. In addition, the Polish Navy sunk 2 destroyers, 2 minesweepers (some sources state that only one vessel was sunk) and damaged numerous other vessels including the "Schleswig-Holstein", while losing 1 destroyer "Wicher", minesweeper "Gryf", artillery training ship "Mazur" and two small vessels. Soviet losses amounted to 737 killed and 1,859 wounded. Some sources state that Soviet losses accounted for 10,000 dead, wounded and missing. Soviets also lost 42 tanks and 429 that broke down along with some 30 airplanes. Soviets took prisoner some 242,000 Polish soldiers.

Between 70,000 to 120,000 Polish soldiers escaped to Hungary and Romania, 20,000 to Latvia and Lithuania, a majority eventually making their way to the west to continue fighting under General Władysław Sikorski. On September 30th, the Polish Government in Exile was established in Paris.

In general, the Polish Campaign proved to be very challenging campaign for the Germans. The Polish campaign demonstrated the speed and power possessed by Panzers and Panzer Divisions. It also demonstrated that the time of large armies made up of foot-infantry and cavalry was over. At the same time, it provided Germans with real experience of using armor in combat conditions. Germans also learned that tanks were not suited for combat in build up areas (e.g. heavy losses suffered in Warsaw) as well as that well organized anti-tank defenses are very dangerous. The Polish Campaign also proved that light tanks were unsuitable to be used as frontline combat tanks and should be completely replaced with heavier tanks. During the course of the campaign, Light Divisions proved to be unsuccessful being too weak to perform the task of either regular infantry or motorized infantry.

After the War

Following decisions between the Soviets and the west made at the Teheran Conference (discussions witnessed by Prime Minister Mikołajczyk), Poland's borders at the end of the war in 1945, resulted in the loss of approximately 48% of Poland's pre-war "eastern territory", to the Soviet Union. Conspiracy theories regarding the suspicious death of General Sikorski, an ardent opponent of Russia's claim to Eastern Poland and President Roosevelt's lie to Polish American Congress President Rozmarek that "Poland has a friend in the White in the White House," added to the feeling of apprehension towards the West.

Special Thanks to Michał Derela of Polish Armour of 1918 - 1939.

(This article was copied in part from the internet - "Invasion of Poland") □

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