

TAC NEWS

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THE BIRTH OF THE BLITZKRIEG, 1939

The Campaign for Poland

Opening Moves

The major point of contention between Germany and Poland was the so-called “Polish Corridor” and the Free City of Danzig (Gdansk). The Corridor was made up of land disputed by both groups and had become a part of Poland after the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler sought to reverse these territorial losses and, on many occasions, made appeals to German nationalism, promising to “liberate” the German minority still in the Corridor, as well as Danzig.

In 1939 tensions began coming to a head and Germany applied increasing pressure on Poland. On April 28, 1939, it withdrew from the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1934 and four months later entered the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union cemented the fate of Poland, as it removed the last real worry Hitler had: Soviet opposition to the German invasion.



Berryman, Clifford Kennedy, Artist. Wonder How Long the Honeymoon Will Last?., 1939, Oct. 9. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016679213/>.

Poland was not left completely alone, however. Under the Franco-Polish Military Alliance, France had already

pledged to support Poland in case of attack. On August 25th, the British also pledged their aid in the Polish-British Common Defense Pact. This was not enough to deter Hitler, and 6 days later, the so-called Gleiwitz Incident occurred. An attack was staged by German units in Polish uniforms against a radio station near the Germany city of Gleiwitz. Hitler used this as an excuse to commence hostilities, and the invasion of Poland began just hours later.

The Forces

The German Army had significant edges in quantity and quality over its Polish counterpart. The two army groups (North and South) fielded a combined army of over 50 divisions with over 1.5 million men. The Poles, on the other hand, had only 26 divisions along with a dozen other brigades (8 cavalry, 3 mountain, and 1 motorized). This disparity was increased because many of the Polish divisions were not fully mobilized at the beginning of the campaign. In tanks, planes, and artillery, the advantage was tipped even further in favor of the Germans.

The Wehrmacht could field over 2,500 tanks compared to the Polish 600. The German artillery arm fielded 5800 guns compared to the Polish 2,000, and the most glaring was the difference in aircraft. The Germans had approximately 2,075 combat aircraft committed to the Polish Campaign, whereas the Polish Air Force—on paper at least—had 1,900 aircraft. Of these, however, over 1,000 were trainers or obsolete types. The defense of the Polish skies would be shouldered by approximately 435 Polish aircraft—an almost 5:1 advantage in favor of the Germans.

“Fall Weiss” (Case White)

The German plan was to invade Poland from two directions. Army Group North, composed of the 3rd and 4th Armies, was to strike eastward across the Polish Corridor as the first arm of attack. Army Group South was to split into three parts: the 8th Army was to move against Lodz;

the 14th Army was to move against Krakow; and the 10th Army, along with the armored component of Army group South was to punch through the center. The ultimate aim of the German plan was the encirclement and destruction of the Polish Army west of the Vistula River, followed by a stroke at the capital, Warsaw.

Unfortunately for the Poles, their defensive plan played right into the hands of the invading Germans. The Polish government, in concert with the promise of French and British aid in the event of an attack, deployed the majority of their forces west of the Vistula along the German border. The plan called for withdrawal eastward if pressed, but it failed to count on the massive mobility difference between the armies.



Motorized troops passing in front of Adolf Hitler. October 16, 1939

The Invasion Begins

Following the Gleiwitz Incident, the first regular act of war took place on September 1, 1939 at 4:40, when the Luftwaffe attacked the town of Wielun, destroying it and killing close to 1,200 people. At 08:00, German troops attacked the town of Mokra.

Despite their pledges of swift and decisive action prior to the invasion, Britain and France did not provide any significant help. Although both countries declared war on Germany on September 3rd, there was only minor skirmishing along the German border with France, and the French were unwilling to press the attack.

After some initial clashes at the border, the German Army began to penetrate the Polish lines and moved to encircle the Polish Army. By September 3rd, Army Group North had reached the Vistula. In Army Group South, an armored corps had reached Warsaw by the 8th—an advance of 140 miles in just a week.

Between the 9th and 13th of September, the Germans reached and attacked the city of Lvov in eastern Poland, and laid siege to Warsaw. The Polish commanders, with much of their army still trapped west of the Vistula, ordered a retreat toward Romania.

The second week of the campaign also saw the only major Polish offensive—the Battle of Bzura. The Poles hit the flank of the Germany 8th Army and crushed the two infantry divisions guarding it. They continued to move south but were finally stopped and overwhelmed by the Germans.

The Soviet Invasion

The 17th of September sounded the death knell of the Polish plan to defend itself. In keeping with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviets sent an army of over 800,000 men into eastern Poland. The Polish border units were completely overmatched, and for the most part, fell back without engaging the Soviets.

Prior to the Soviet attack from the east, the Polish military's fallback plan had called for long-term defense against Germany in the southern-eastern part of Poland, while awaiting relief from a Western Allies attack on Germany's western border. However, the Polish government refused to surrender or negotiate a peace with Germany. Instead, it ordered all units to evacuate Poland and reorganize in France. Meanwhile, Polish forces tried to move towards the Romanian Bridgehead area, still fighting the German Army along the way. The Battle of Tomaszow Lubelski, the second largest of the campaign, saw the destruction of two more Polish armies.

The End of the Campaign

One by one, the remaining Polish cities fell. Lvov surrendered to the Soviets on September 22nd. Warsaw, after desperate street fighting, finally surrendered on September 28th. Some isolated Polish garrisons managed to hold their positions long after being surrounded by German forces. The Red Army reached the line of rivers Narew, Western Bug, Vistula, and San by September 28th, in many



Wehrmacht soldiers removing Polish government insignia in Gdynia, September 14, 1939

cases meeting German units advancing from the other direction. The last operational unit of the Polish Army surrendered after a forty-day battle near Lublin on October 6th, ending the Polish Campaign.

The Cost

The Polish Campaign offered glimpses into some of the horrors that would occur during the next six years. The campaign saw air attacks on civilians, both undefended towns, as well as refugees. It also bore witness to the beginnings of the activities of the Einsatzgruppen. Over 150, 000 Polish civilians were killed during the course of the campaign.

The Campaign for France

Opening Moves

Following the invasion of Poland in September 1939, there was a lull in hostilities between Germany and her enemies. In fact, on October 9th, Hitler offered a peace treaty to both England and France. It was rejected by both countries within days. This began a period of inaction—known as the Phoney War—while Germany prepared for her invasion of the West.

In April 1940, the Germans launched an invasion of Denmark and Norway. The British attempted to intervene, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

Opposing Plans

Several plans for the conquest of the West were presented to Hitler. The first of these was by Franz Halder, the chief of staff of the German High Command, the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH). It was a pessimistic plan that called for a costly attack on the Low Countries, with a follow up attack on France in 1942.

Hitler was unimpressed, and so were several of the other German generals. In late October, Erich von Manstein, General Gerd von Rundstedt's chief of staff, began working on an alternative version. Manstein conferred with Heinz Guderian, who convinced Manstein that a decisive thrust should be made by German armor toward the English Channel. It was Guderian's hope that this thrust would cause the collapse of resistance.

Manstein's plan and several subsequent revisions were rejected by the OKH. It wasn't until January 1940, when

Manstein was transferred out of Rundstedt's command, that Hitler heard about the alternative plan. Manstein was invited to present it to Hitler directly in mid-February. Hitler preferred this one to Halder's plan and ordered Halder to initiate the changes. Halder shifted the focus of the attack, the Schwerpunkt, to the Ardennes. In order to keep the French and British armies diverted from the main threat, German Army Group B would launch an attack against Belgium and the Netherlands, hoping to draw the Allied forces eastward and allow their encirclement and destruction.

The French had their own plans for the coming conflict. Most favored a cautious approach, holding a large reserve north of Paris to be ready to react to a German incursion. If the Germans attacked from the south or directly across the border between Germany and France, the reserve would be well-placed to stop the attack. If the Germans attacked through the Low Countries, the French would wait until they actually reached France before they would engage them.

Not all of the French commanders agreed with this plan. The French Supreme Commander, Maurice Gamelin, rejected these plans. He had several reasons, two in particular being paramount. Firstly, he refused to leave the Low Countries to their fate. Secondly, he did not believe that the French Army could defeat the Germans in a mobile battle, and the Polish Campaign confirmed that opinion.

Gamelin originally submitted a plan that called for a defense based upon a series of fortifications along much of the actual Belgian-French border rather than in Belgium proper. This was rejected and a second plan named the "Dyle Plan" was adopted. This plan, named after the River Dyle in Belgium, would have the French and British forces defend along the river, east of Brussels. Given the defensible nature of the river boundary, Gamelin felt that the Germans would try and break through near Namur, where the Meuse river turned sharply to the east, which created a gap through which German tanks could pour. The French would concentrate half of their armored reserves there. Finally, in order to link up with the Dutch forces, he assigned the French 7th Army to maintain a connection with Holland.

"The Birth of the Blitzkrieg", printed here with kind permission of TOB Games, will conclude in the next issue of Tac News.

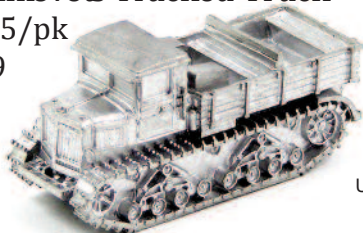
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