

Achtung Panzer ! - Invasion of Poland (Fall Weiss)

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Invasion of Poland
(Fall Weiss)
by George Parada

"...in general the bravery and heroism of the Polish Army merits great respect."
Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt

On Friday, September 1st of 1939, Germany invaded Poland after long-term political crises. German invasion began with an air raid on undefended city of Wielun at 4:40am. Over 1200 people were killed in first warcrime of World War II. At 4:45am, German Battleship (training ship) "Schleswig-Holstein" (on a so-called "goodwill visit") opened fire on a Polish naval depot and garrison at Westeplatte. An hour later, first German units crossed the border. On September 3rd, 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. Originally, Germany was to invade Poland in early hours of August 26th of 1939, but at 8:00pm on August 25th, Hitler postponed it. Final order went out at 4:00pm on August 31st to invade Poland at 4:45am 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, Gdansk, Jablonkow). 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. Colonel General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South was composed of General Blaskowitz's 8th, General von Reichenau's 10th and General-Colonel List's 14th Army. In total, Army Group South had 18 Infantry, 4 Slovak Infantry, 1 Mountain Division, 2 Motorized, 4 Light Motorized, 4 Panzer Divisions and attacked from Silesia / Moravia and Slovakia. The Army Group South had the strongest armored formations with over 2000 tanks and 800 armored cars. General Gunther von Kluge's 4th Army, part of Colonel General Fedor von Bock's Army Group North (8 Infantry, 2 Motorized and 1 Panzer Division) attacked from Western Pomerania. General Georg von Kuechler's 3rd Army, part of Colonel General Fedor von Bock's Army Group North (11 Infantry and 1 Panzer Division) attacked from East Prussia. The Army Group North had some 600 tanks and 200 armored cars. All three attacks were directed mainly towards the capitol of Poland - Warsaw and destruction of Polish forces west of River Vistula. In total, German forces included some 1.850.000 soldiers, over 3100 tanks and 10000 artillery pieces along with 2085 airplanes (grouped in two air fleets - Luftflotte). Attacking force also included Kriegsmarine "Ost" ("East") Group, which supported ground

units and faced Polish Navy. The attacking force also held advantage by being able to attack Poland from three directions at once. Germans also had a well-established spy network and could count on help of many ethnic Germans living in Poland. In addition, Germans very well knew Polish rail and road network as being the ones who build it.

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

Left: Marshal Edward Smigly-Rydz.

The Polish Army was not yet fully mobilized and unprepared for war, as according to the defence plan - Z (Zachod - West). Poles responded to German attacks on 1600 kilometres long front, attempting to contain the invading force in order to counterattack and protect industrial centres. Polish planners correctly predicted directions of German attacks but knew that they could only delay them in order to allow its Allies to act. During the course of 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 size of the armed forces to 1.350.000), some 900 tanks and 4300 artillery pieces along with some 435 airplanes. Only part of the Polish Navy under Admiral Swirski was present in the Baltic Sea 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 small percentage of all Polish equipment was modern, while the rest was largely obsolete because in 1936, Poland began process of reorganization and rearmament. Polish army lacked motorized transport and relied on foot infantry and horse drawn transport. In addition, Polish army was not fully mobilized and surrounded by the enemy from three sides along 3000 kilometers long frontier.

On September 1st and 2nd, Polish Army was already involved in heavy fighting (e.g. Battle of Mlawa, Battle of Pomerania), while retreating eastwards in attempt to establish line of defence and 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 fallback 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 either defend or withdraw. 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 Cracow after forcing Army Krakow to withdraw eastwards following danger of being encircled from the north. On same day, after heavy fighting, Piotrkow Trybunalski surrendered after failure of Polish plan to counterattack with not yet fully mobilized Army Prusy. On September 7th, after 7 days of desperate defence and inflicting heavy German casualties Polish naval depot and garrison at Westerplatte under Major Sucharski surrendered. After heavy fighting and desperate defence, on September 8th, Germans reached Warsaw, day after Westerplatte finally surrendered. On September 9th, the bloodiest and bitter battle of the entire campaign began. The Battle of Bzura was a Polish counteroffensive directed to protect Warsaw and took place in area of Kutno, Lowicz and Sochaczew. It was executed by Army Pomorze and Poznan, both being in danger of being surrounded by German 8th Army. At first, Poles were successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the German forces due to the element of surprise. Polish Army managed to push Germans back but could not maintain the momentum due to low supply of food and ammunition as well situation on the other parts of the front. Again, the speed of the German units made further operations impossible and by September 16th, Germans began pushing the Polish Army towards Warsaw. The battle ended on September 20th with the total destruction of Polish forces (under General Tadeusz Kutrzeba) involved, although it delayed the capitulation of Warsaw. The Battle of Bzura involved 18 German divisions from 4th, 8th and 10th Army with air support and two Polish Armies. Small number of Polish units broke through and fought their way out and reached Warsaw. On September 10th, German entered Poznan after Army Poznan withdrew from the city. Following September 18th, the largest tank versus tank engagement of the campaign took place near Tomaszow Lubelski, where some 80 Polish tankettes and tanks met in combat with German tanks. German 4th Panzer Division closed on Warsaw on September 7th. First German attack on Warsaw took place on September 9th but until September 24th, Polish defenders successfully rejected all attacks. On September 25th, Germans began ground and aerial bombardment of the city and on September 25th to 27th, unsuccessfully attempted to storm the city. On September 28th, Warsaw capitulated because of the extreme conditions and lack of supplies. At the same time, from September 10th to 29th, Fortress Modlin (under General Wiktor Thommee) was also unsuccessfully attacked by the Germans, until its capitulation on September 29th, because of the lack of supplies and capitulation of Warsaw.

On Sunday, September 17th, Lublin surrendered to the Germans. On the same day at 4.00am, 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 came as a surprise and made regrouping of remaining Polish forces an impossible task. 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 Ukrainian and General Kowalow's Belorussian. Both fronts consisted of 1.5 million soldiers, 6191 tanks, 1800 airplanes and 9140 artillery pieces. After heavy fighting, on September 18th, Soviets captured Wilno, followed by Grodno and Lwow on September 22nd, reaching River Bug on September 23rd. Polish High Command ordered not to engage the Red Army but only in case of disarming and detaining by the Soviets. Unfortunately, the order didn't reach all units. At first, Soviets were seen by both the Polish Army and population as

coming to help them fight the Germans and were not opposed at all, but it was quickly realized that 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, Polish President and High Command along with a single battalion equipped with Renault R-35 (along with other units) entered Romania, where they were interned. On September 18th, Germans and Soviets met in Bresc nad Bugiem and exchanged "greetings". On October 2nd, Polish defenders of Hel (under Rear Admiral Unrug) capitulated, while last battle of the Polish campaign took place on October 2nd to 5th - Battle of Kock (Independent Operational Group Polesie under General Franciszek Kleeberg). On Friday, October 6th of 1939, last Polish troops capitulated.

German armored units included 7 (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, part of 10th and Kempf) Panzer Divisions, 4 Light Divisions (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th) and 4 Motorized Infantry Divisions. German Panzer force as of September 1st of 1939 had 1445 PzKpfw I, 1223 PzKpfw II light tanks and 98 PzKpfw III, 211 PzKpfw IV medium tanks. In addition, there were 215 command tanks and other armored vehicles including 202 ex-Czech PzKpfw 35(t) and 78 PzKpfw 38(t). Along with tanks, there were some 308 heavy armored cars (Sd.Kfz.231/232/263), 718 light armored cars (Sd.Kfz.13/14 and Sd.Kfz.221/222) along with 68 Sd.Kfz.251 medium armored personnel

carriers.

(For info about German armored fighting vehicles visit Panzer Profiles section)

Unit	PzKpfw I	PzKpfw II	PzKpfw III (37mm)	PzKpfw IV	PzKpfw 35(t)	(PzBef)	PzKpfw 38(t)	(PzBef)	PzBef	Total
1st Pz Div	93	122	26	56					12	309
2nd Pz Div	124	155	6	17					20	322
3rd Pz Div	122	176	43	32					18	391
4th Pz Div	183	130	12						16	341
5th Pz Div	152	144	3	14					22	335
10th Pz Div	57	74	3	7					9	150
Pz Div Kempf	61	81	3	9					10	164
1st Leichte Div	65	41	112	(8)						226
2nd Leichte Div	41	42							2	85
3rd Leichte Div	23		55	(2)						80
4th Leichte Div	34	23							5	62
Pz.Reg.25106	92	3	10						14	225
	973	1220	87	198	120	57	128			2650

Polish Army used variety of vehicles, foreign and licence build. Those included: 574 TK and TKS tankettes (light reconnaissance tanks), 102 obsolete Renault FT-17 light tanks, 132 7TP light tanks, 38 Vickers 6-ton light tanks, 49-53 R-35 light tanks and 3 Hotchkiss H-35 light tanks along with approximately 100 armored cars (e.g. wz.29 and wz.34). In addition, Polish Army operated 11 armored trains (4 more improvised trains were made during the campaign). Polish Army's tanks were grouped in Light Tank Battalions (1st, 2nd and 21st) and Light Tank Companies (12th, 111th, 112th, 113th 121st and 1st and 2nd Warsaw Defence). Tankettes served with Infantry Divisions, Cavalry Brigades and Independent units (companies and platoons) attached to larger units. In addition, Poland had single - 10th Mechanized Brigade commanded by Colonel Stanislaw Maczek (future commander of the 1st Polish Armored Division) and single Warsaw Armored-Motorised Brigade commanded by Colonel Stefan Rowecki (first commander to come of the Polish Home Army), which was still being formed.

(For info about Polish armored fighting vehicles visit Bron Pancerna section)

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. Polish Campaign is surrounded by numerous myths such as the destruction of Polish Airforce 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 truth. Polish cavalry was active during the campaign and acted as horse mounted infantry. One of the most successful cavalry charges took place at Krojanty, where elements of 18th Uhlans Regiment attacked and destroyed German infantry battalion only to be counterattacked by German armored unit. Uhlans attempted to withdraw and suffered heavy losses. This event lead to the story of Polish cavalry charges on panzers. Polish Airforce 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 sabres or lances as they were equipped with anti-tank weapons such as 37mm Bofors wz.36 (model 1936) anti-tank guns (that could penetrate 26mm armor at 600m at 30 degrees). The cavalry brigades were in the process of being reorganized into motorized brigades.

German casualties (8082 to 10572 killed, 27,278 to 30322 wounded and 3404 to 5029 missing) were very low compare to Polish casualties (66300 killed, 133700 wounded and 420000 taken prisoner). Poles lost 327 out of their 435 airplanes in combat, while 98 flew to Romania. In addition, 26000 civilians were killed during the fighting. Germans lost some 993 to 1000 armored fighting vehicles (mainly destroyed by anti-tank guns), 370 to 400 artillery pieces, 697 to 1300 airplanes (damaged and destroyed) along with 11000 motor vehicles. According to the German sources only 89 PzKpfw I, 83 PzKpfw II, 26 PzKpfw III, 19 PzKpfw IV, 5 command tanks, 7 PzKpfw 35(t) and 7 PzKpfw 38(t) were completely lost. In addition, Polish Navy sunk 2 destroyers, 2 minelayers (some sources state that only one vessel was sunk) and damaged numerous other vessels including "Schleswig-Holstein", while losing single destroyer "Wicher", minelayer "Gryf", artillery training ship "Mazur" and two small vessels. Soviet losses amounted to 737 killed and 1859 wounded. Some sources state that Soviet losses accounted for 10000 dead, wounded and missing. Soviets also lost 42 tanks and 429 that broke down along with some 30 airplanes. Soviets took prisoner some 242000 Polish soldiers.

Some 70000 to 120000 Polish soldiers escaped to Hungary and Romania, 20000 to Latvia and Lithuania, majority eventually making their way west to continue fighting under General Wladyslaw Sikorski. On September 30th, Polish Government in Exile was established in Paris.

In general, Polish Campaign proved to be very challenging campaign for the Germans. 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. Polish Campaign also proved that PzKpfw I and II were unsuitable to be used as frontline combat

tanks and should be completely replaced with heavier PzKpfw III and IV. During the course of the campaign, Light Divisions proved to be unsuccessful being too weak to perform tasks of either regular infantry or motorized infantry.

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