



# SEPTEMBER 1939

## POLAND VIS-À-VIS THE GERMAN AND SOVIET AGGRESSION



INSTYTUT  
PAMIĘCI  
NARODOWEJ

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Photographs:

Polish soldiers wearing gas masks during field exercises in the early 1930s. Jerzy Krzewicki's collection. Red Army soldier with German soldiers on the future Soviet-German border on the San River, September 1939. Photograph G. Wagner, "Sudeten-SA in Polen. Ein bildbericht vom Einsatz sudetendeutscher SA-Männer im polnischen Feldzug", Karlsbad - Leipzig 1940.





Marshall Józef Piłsudski with Polish officers.  
Photograph: NAC.

The leader of the reborn Republic was Józef Piłsudski as Chief of State, commander-in-chief and Marshall of Poland. He was well aware that the two neighboring powers – Germany and Soviet Russia – and their cooperation would be the fundamental danger to an independent Poland. When the two countries signed the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, he said: “The treaty of Rapallo should have torn the last scales from our eyes: the Russian-German concord had gone so far that not only is it a fait accompli [...] but an irreversible fact.”

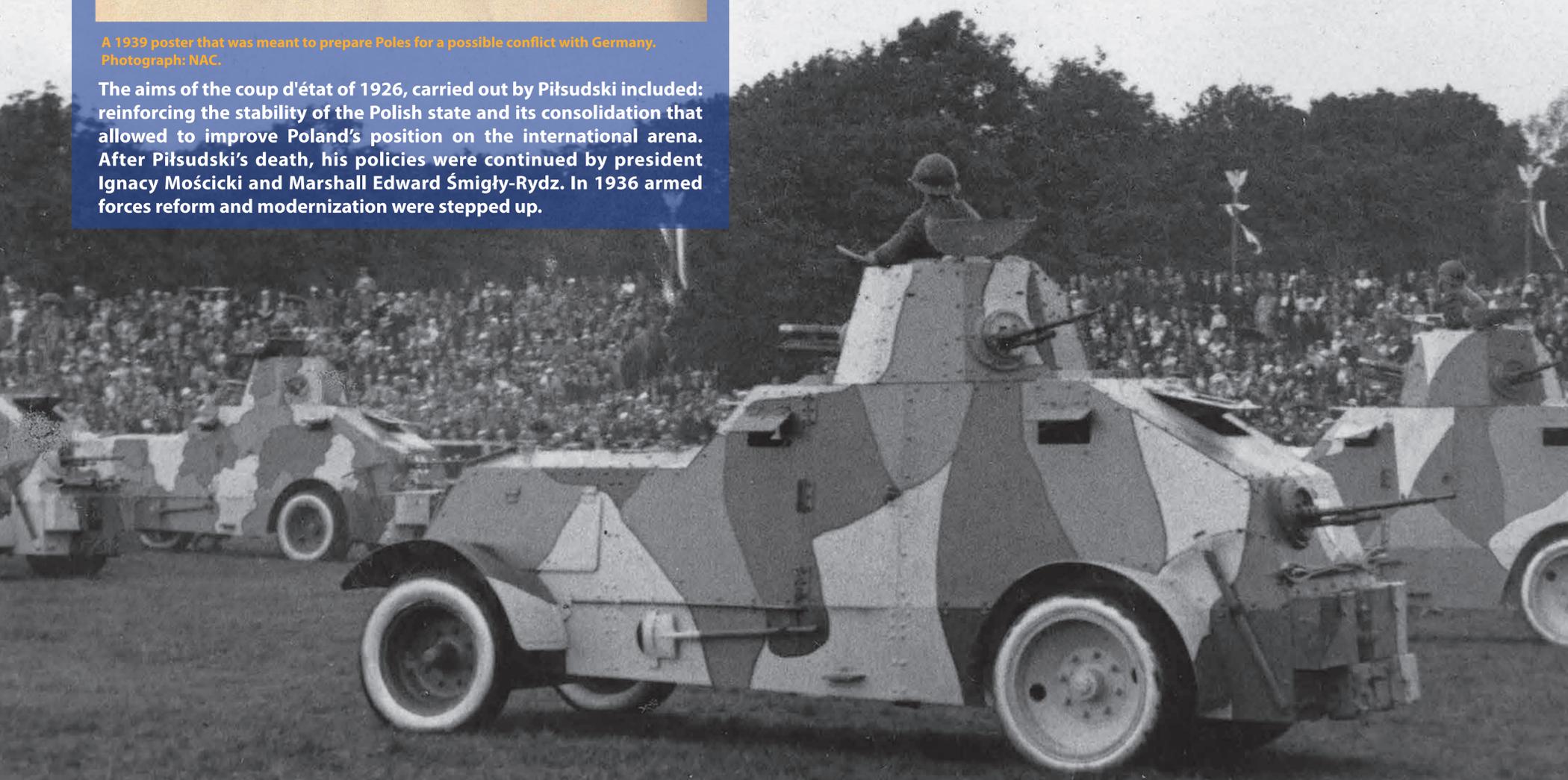
In 1918, after 123 years of captivity, Poland was back on the political map of Europe. The Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I sealed the new order that included an independent Polish state. But it not determine her borders, and the Poles had to fight for them both diplomatically and arms-in-hand. The military effort also made it possible to defend the reborn Republic against the Bolshevik invasion. The Polish victory over the Red Army in 1920 saved not only Polish independence but also the rest of Europe from communism. The defeat of the Bolsheviks made it possible to secure the independence of several small states in this part of the continent.

# INDEPENDENT POLAND



A 1939 poster that was meant to prepare Poles for a possible conflict with Germany.  
Photograph: NAC.

The aims of the coup d'état of 1926, carried out by Piłsudski included: reinforcing the stability of the Polish state and its consolidation that allowed to improve Poland's position on the international arena. After Piłsudski's death, his policies were continued by president Ignacy Mościcki and Marshall Edward Śmigły-Rydz. In 1936 armed forces reform and modernization were stepped up.



The parade in Pole Mokotowskie in Warsaw on 11 November 1933.  
Ursus armed vehicles on parade. Jerzy Krzewicki's collection.



Adolf Hitler at the Prague Castle (Hradcany) after occupying Czechoslovakia, 15 March 1939. Photograph: Bundesarchiv/Wikimedia Commons.

As he was rebuilding the power of the Reich, Hitler had to tolerate the existence of the Polish state. In 1934 he agreed to sign a non-violence declaration. But it was clear that the existence of an independent Poland cannot be reconciled with the ideological goals and expansion plans in the East. In his immediate circle of associates and military commanders, Hitler did not hide that he treated Poland as the primary obstacle for Germany long-term goals. There was no variant in which the totalitarian and imperialist Reich could accept co-existence with Poland, respect its borders and independence. What had just happened to Czechoslovakia demonstrated that a policy of concessions to ever changing demands opened the way for complete dependence on Germany.

In Soviet plans, the key to victory was to combine the Russian revolution with a revolution in Germany. The lost war with Poland in 1920 was the cause in stopping the progress of the revolution. The Bolsheviks were certain that it undermined their plans to eliminate the existing socio-political order in Europe. Joseph Stalin had reasons to call Poland a "barrier" for the spread of international communism. Recognizing the existence of an independent Poland, he signed a non-aggression treaty in 1932. In fact, this did not change his hostile attitude and sabotage operations carried out by underground communist structures.



Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin in 1924. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

# BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND LEBENSRAUM

A propaganda poster of the German Eastern Union calling for support for the final fight for eastern territories.

Photograph: Public domain.



Reborn Poland was an element of the so-called Versailles order. It was no accident that the Poles were interested in maintaining permanent peace and preserving the key elements of the order. There were two determined enemies of the Versailles order, Poland's two neighbors: Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler's strategic aim was to regain territories lost after World War I and conquering new ones in the East, the so-called living space for the Germans (Lebensraum). On the other hand, the communist party that ruled the USSR and its leaders never dropped their plans to expanded their empire by exporting revolution to other countries. Communist ideology was concordant with ambitions to conquer the entire world in order to build a new, totalitarian political and social reality.



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The peak of appeasement, the Munich talks in September 1938. From the left: prime minister of fascist Italy Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and French prime minister Édouard Daladier.  
Photograph: Bundesarchiv/Wikimedia Commons.

After Rhineland remilitarization and the annexation of Austria, Czech Republic and Moravia, after the Slovak state was turned into a satellite and after Memel was occupied, Hitler made open demands to Poland. Theoretically, these concerned only the Free State of Danzig and the transit across the Polish Pomerania. In return, he offered guarantees for the new Polish borders. Thus it was an offer similar to that he made to the Czechs at Munich in 1938. It was obvious that if those demands were to be granted, it would be the first step toward a complete subjugation of Poland to the policies and goals of the German Reich.



Józef Beck w trakcie przemowy sejmowej 5 maja 1939 r.  
Photograph: „Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny”, 13 May 1939.

On 5 May 1939, the minister of foreign affairs, Józef Beck on behalf of Poland rejected the German territorial claims. He said that they were “one-sided” and the German “offer” comes down to granting Poland what is already “de iure and de facto our undisputed and property.” In conclusion Beck said poignantly: “Peace is a valuable and desirable thing. Our generation, which has shed its blood in several wars, surely deserves a period of peace. But peace, like almost everything in this world, has its price, high but definable. We in Poland do not recognize the conception of ‘peace at any price’. There is only one thing in the life of men, nations and States which is without price, and that is honor.”

# ALLIES



Gen. Maurice Gamelin in the company of French and British military personnel by a cannon at the training ground Aldershot, England, June 1939.  
Photograph: NAC.

Regardless of action aimed at armed forces modernization, it was evident that the fundamental condition of Polish independence was cooperation with the greatest European powers. The military alliances with France (with army larger than Germany) and Great Britain (naval and air superpower), from the German point of view, posited the obvious danger of war on two fronts. Mutual agreements offered the chance to encircle Hitler's Germany, as it was the case during World War I. During Polish-French talks of 1939, it was agreed that in case of German invasion of Poland, the French air force would start immediate operations, and three days later they would launch “offensive operations with limited goals”, and after fifteen days, France was to “start offensive operations against Germany with their main forces.”

This agreement was in concordance with the Polish-British treaty of 25 August 1939. Great Britain committed itself to “offer without delay all help and support in its power” to invaded Poland. Poland committed itself to help the allies in case of German aggression in the West.



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Territorial expansion plans temporarily joined German and Soviet interests against Poland. On 23 August 1939, in Moscow, the Soviet-German treaty was signed, named after the names of the signatories, the chiefs of the diplomacies of the two states, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. This document paved the way for the war. For Hitler, an alliance with Stalin was an additional guarantee of success, as it increased the chance for a swift victory over Poland. A secret protocol to the alliance treaty provided for a division of Poland along the Narew-Vistula-San rivers, and it defined the spheres of influence of the USSR and the German Reich in Central and Eastern Europe. Apart from eastern Poland, the Soviet zone was to include: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Romanian Bessarabia. Germany was to occupy western Poland and Lithuania with Polish Vilnius. The treaty was reconfirmed, with some corrections, on 28 September 1939.



From the left: chief of the press department of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs Friedrich Gauss, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Józef Stalin, and the Soviet minister of foreign affairs Vyacheslav Molotov. Photograph: Public domain.

# RIBBENTROP - MOLOTOV

Excerpt from the secret supplementary protocol to the Soviet-German non-aggression pact:

1. In the event of territorial-political reorganization of the districts making up the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern border of Lithuania is simultaneously the border of the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR. The interests of Lithuania with respect to the Vilnius district are recognized by both sides.
2. In the event of territorial-political reorganization of the districts making up the Polish Republic, the border of the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR will run approximately along the Pisa, Narew, Vistula, and San rivers. The question of whether it is in the (signatories') mutual interest to preserve the independent Polish State and what the borders of that state will be can be ascertained conclusively only in the course of future political development. In any event, both governments will resolve this matter through friendly mutual agreement.
3. Concerning south-eastern Europe, the Soviet side emphasizes the interest of the USSR in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.
4. This protocol will be held in strict secrecy by both sides.

Moscow, 23 August 1939.

For the Government of Germany  
v. Ribbentrop

With the authorization of the  
Government of the USSR  
V. Molotov



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Map of partitioned Poland as per the German-Soviet non-aggression pact of 28 September 1939, signed by Joachim von Ribbentrop and Joseph Stalin. Photograph: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin.



German soldiers penetrate the Westerplatte forest after the defense of the Polish base ended. Photograph: Bundesarchiv/Wikimedia Commons.

The symbol of Polish resistance in September 1939 was the seven days long defense of the Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte in Gdańsk. Under Maj. Henryk Sucharski's and Capt. Franciszek Dąbrowski's command, this small crew originally charged with six to twelve hours of defense, resisted the Germans for a week. Polish Radio informed: "Westerplatte is fighting on!"



Wieluń after German bombing 1 September 1939. Photograph: Muzeum Ziemi Wieluńskiej.

From the first moments of the war, German troops attacked civilian installations and cruelly treated the Polish population. In the early morning hours of 1 September the Germans bombed Wieluń, a town where no troops stationed at that time. Seventy-five percent of the town was destroyed, with from 1000 to 2169 dead. The deliberate bombing of Wieluń is regarded as one of the first German war crimes of World War II.

# GERMAN AGGRESSION



The German battleship "Schleswig-Holstein" firing on Westerplatte, 1 September 1939. Photograph: Bundesarchiv/Public domain.

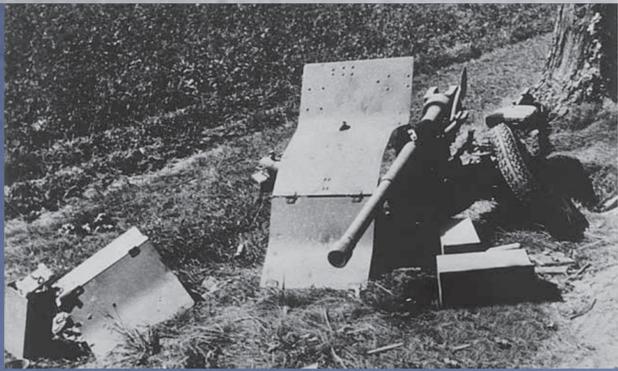
The Germans attacked Poland on 1 September 1939 from the west, from the north and, jointly with Slovakia, from the south. They applied the Blitzkrieg tactics, based on combined armor and air attack. The German army threw virtually all their military force in an attempt to use the enormous advantage it had in these two kinds of weaponry. Armored divisions drove wedges into Polish defenses, broke it and thus opened the way for other troops who would then operate in the defenders' rear, forcing them to withdraw in order to avoid encirclement.

Hitler expected that a swift campaign would make it possible to limit the war to a local conflict. That is why the Germans planned to break Polish resistance already west of the Vistula river, and impatiently waited for the Red Army to join in the war. Hitler was also afraid of an allied attack, so he issued a directive that prohibited any action in the west lest it provoke resolute action of France and Great Britain.

Polish retreat, skillfully carried out, prevented swift victory and extended the entire campaign, giving the allies the time to fulfil their commitments and to launch an offensive in the West.



# BORDER FIGHTS



Destroyed Polish anti-tank cannon on the defense positions of 6 Infantry Division near Pszczyna. Photograph: AIPN.

One of the key elements of the Polish defense was "Cracow" Army that covered the south-western border. Based on fortifications built before the war in Silesia it was to be the "hinge" for Polish defense to move from the north-west south-east. However, the Germans circumvented the strongest position of "Cracow" Army, threatening to encircle it, so on the first day of the campaign it became necessary to withdraw some of its detachments east. This happened despite the heroic defense put up by the Poles, including the fortifications in Węgierska Górka near Żywiec.



Schematic map of border fights in September 1939. IPN Archives.



German and Slovak soldiers on the former Polish-Slovak border in 1939. Photograph: Dawid Golik's collection.

The least expected participant of the September campaign in the south were Slovak troops, which joined the Wehrmacht from the very outset of the war. The Slovaks attacked the Polish defenses in Podhale, in the Pieniny, Beskidy and Bieszczady Mountains, supporting the German divisions operating there. Hitler later rewarded Slovakia by allowing it to occupy the Polish parts of Orava and Spiš.

Polish defense plans involved a battle with Germany on the border belt and a gradual transfer of defense to the Narew-Vistula-San rivers line. The idea was to prolong defense operations combined with gradual retreat south-west along the entire front. The Polish strategy was founded on the conception of joint operations of the Polish army and the French and British air forces.

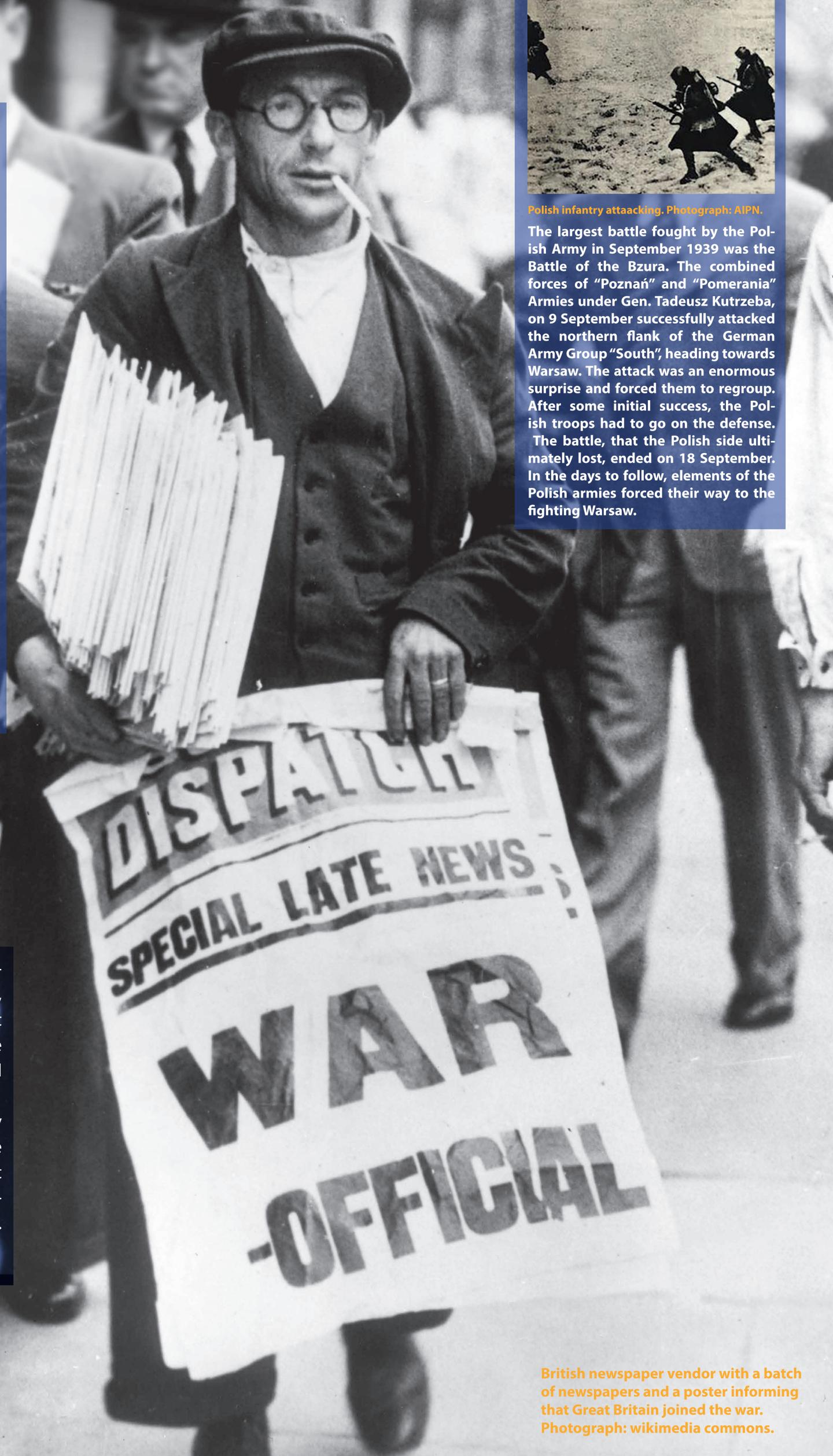
The German tactics of armored wedge assaults had never been used for this type of forces. Nevertheless, bitter fights took place in northern Mazovia, Pomerania, Silesia, and in southern Poland thus hindering the implementation of German plans at a pace that Hitler had envisaged. The Soviet Union delayed its assault, watching the developments.

# WORLD WAR



Anti-aircraft machine gun in front of the Main Station, Warsaw.  
Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

At the same time as the Battle of the Bzura, defense of Warsaw continued. The capital put up bitter resistance. Bombings, under regular artillery barrage and assaulted a number of times, fought until 28 September. The defense was ended after four weeks due to the tragic situation of the civilian population and the overall situation of Poland fighting all alone. The administrator mayor of Warsaw, Stefan Starzyński, in one of his radio speeches said proudly: I wanted Warsaw to be great. I believed it would be great. [...] It happened sooner than we thought. [...] And although wonderful orphanages have now been replaced by rubble, although barricades covered with corpses have now replaced parks, although our libraries and hospitals are burning – Warsaw is defending its honor at the pinnacle of greatness and glory today, not in fifty years, not in a hundred years."



Polish infantry attacking. Photograph: AIPN.

The largest battle fought by the Polish Army in September 1939 was the Battle of the Bzura. The combined forces of "Poznań" and "Pomerania" Armies under Gen. Tadeusz Kutrzeba, on 9 September successfully attacked the northern flank of the German Army Group "South", heading towards Warsaw. The attack was an enormous surprise and forced them to regroup. After some initial success, the Polish troops had to go on the defense. The battle, that the Polish side ultimately lost, ended on 18 September. In the days to follow, elements of the Polish armies forced their way to the fighting Warsaw.

From day one, Poland fulfilled its alliance commitments by putting up staunch resistance, awaiting armed support of France and Great Britain. The Poles fought, being fully aware that only joint efforts of three allies could lead to a victory Germany.

The determined resistance of the Polish Army yielded results. The allies were forced to take definite steps. On 3 September 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on the German Reich. British dominions followed suit. The conflict became global.



# POLAND DOOMED

**N**ever – neither in 1938 nor in 1939 – could we have coped with a concentrated joint attack of those states [i.e., Great Britain, France, and Poland]. And if we were not already defeated in 1939, this could only be explained by the fact that during the Polish campaign around 110 French and British divisions remained completely passive vis-à-vis the 23 German divisions.”

German chief of staff and co-author of plans to attack Poland **Gen. Alfred Jodl.**

A Scottish soldier watches through a periscope the foreground of the French defenses of the Maginot Line, November 1939. Imperial War Museum/ Wikimedia Commons.



British and French soldiers on the fringe of a French airfield, during the so-called “phoney war”, November 1939. Photograph: Imperial War Museum/wikimedia commons.

In the end, France and Great Britain did not fulfil their commitments as Poland’s allies. When the Polish Army fought against the overwhelming enemy forces, the allied armies were virtually passive. This was sanctioned during the first joint meeting of the French-British Supreme War Council at Abbeville on 12 September 1939, where the “decision not to launch any large-scale operation in France” was deemed “wise”. As a result, the allies squandered an opportunity to win and win the war swiftly, and wasted the military potential of their ally, and in the process enabled the Germans to prepare a military operation in the West and their further military successes.



Instead of bombing strategic targets in Germany, British bombers mounted only limited-scale operations. Vickers Wellington bombers in formation. Photograph: Imperial War Museum/Wikimedia Commons.

Polish defense strategy was designed to enable the allies to mount an attack in the west. The idea was to make the Germans divide their forces, most of which were deployed in the east. Only such a scenario guaranteed a joint victory.

Upon declaring war, the British government was determined to launch active military operations. On 4 September a delegation was sent to Paris to decide on the course of the future offensive. As it turned out, the French commander-in-chief Gen. Maurice Gamelin was against any large-scale action. According to the minutes, Gen. Gamelin was “under his government’s pressure to take steps in order to quickly ease off the German pressure on Poland. The general resists the pressure [...] and does not intend to take hasty action so as to avoiding putting the cream of the French army at risk in rash operations [...]”

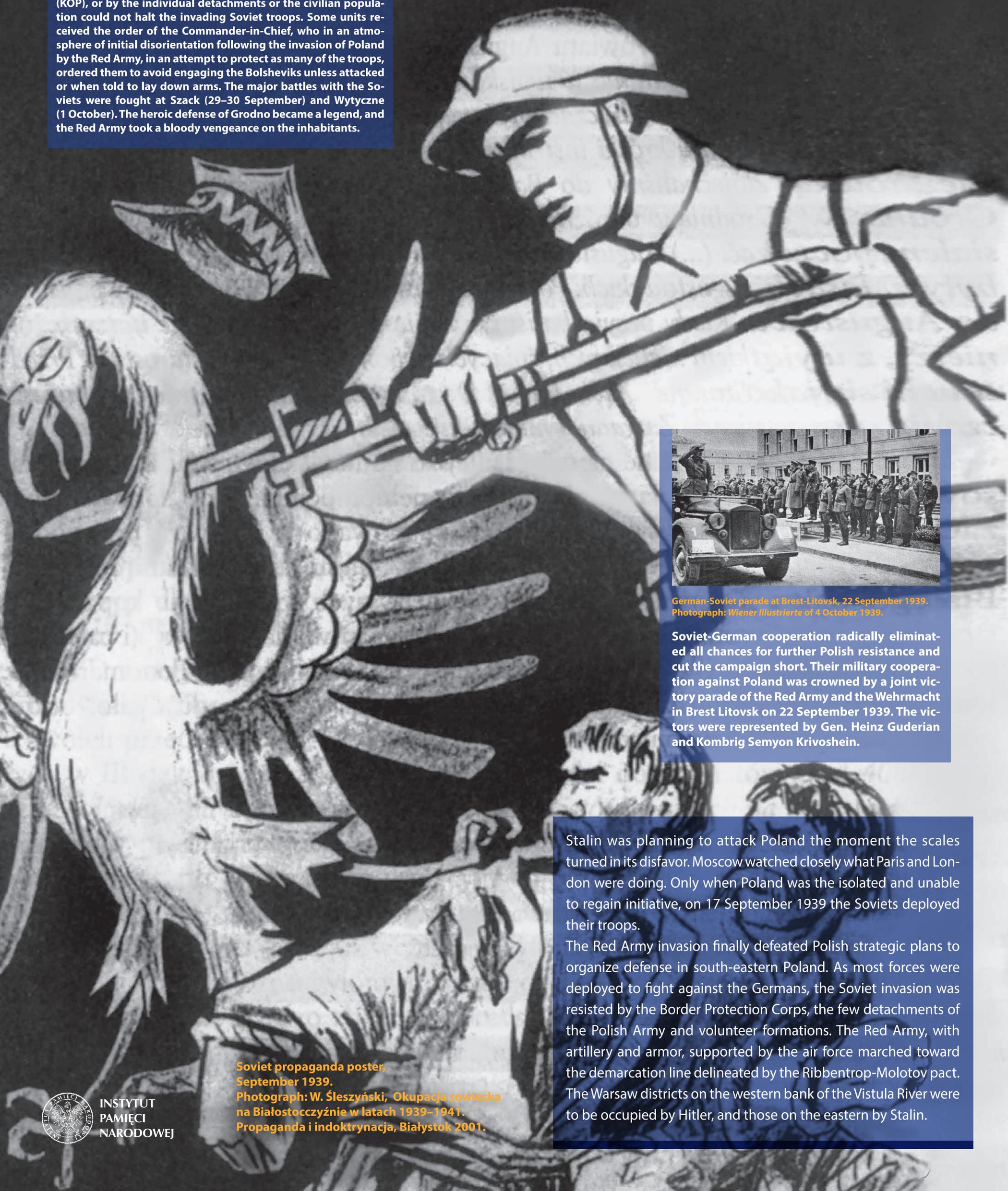




Soviet armored vehicle, destroyed in combat. Wołkowysk, September 1939. Photograph: NAC.

Bitter resistance put up by the weakened Border Guard Corps (KOP), or by the individual detachments or the civilian population could not halt the invading Soviet troops. Some units received the order of the Commander-in-Chief, who in an atmosphere of initial disorientation following the invasion of Poland by the Red Army, in an attempt to protect as many of the troops, ordered them to avoid engaging the Bolsheviks unless attacked or when told to lay down arms. The major battles with the Soviets were fought at Szack (29–30 September) and Wytoczne (1 October). The heroic defense of Grodno became a legend, and the Red Army took a bloody vengeance on the inhabitants.

# INVASION FROM THE EAST



German-Soviet parade at Brest-Litovsk, 22 September 1939. Photograph: Wiener Illustrierte of 4 October 1939.

Soviet-German cooperation radically eliminated all chances for further Polish resistance and cut the campaign short. Their military cooperation against Poland was crowned by a joint victory parade of the Red Army and the Wehrmacht in Brest Litovsk on 22 September 1939. The victors were represented by Gen. Heinz Guderian and Kombrig Semyon Krivoshein.

Stalin was planning to attack Poland the moment the scales turned in its disfavor. Moscow watched closely what Paris and London were doing. Only when Poland was the isolated and unable to regain initiative, on 17 September 1939 the Soviets deployed their troops.

The Red Army invasion finally defeated Polish strategic plans to organize defense in south-eastern Poland. As most forces were deployed to fight against the Germans, the Soviet invasion was resisted by the Border Protection Corps, the few detachments of the Polish Army and volunteer formations. The Red Army, with artillery and armor, supported by the air force marched toward the demarcation line delineated by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. The Warsaw districts on the western bank of the Vistula River were to be occupied by Hitler, and those on the eastern by Stalin.

Soviet propaganda poster, September 1939. Photograph: W. Śleszyński, *Okupacja sowiecka na Białostocczyźnie w latach 1939–1941. Propaganda i indoktrynacja, Białystok 2001.*





Bunker on Góra Strękowa, the command point of the Wizna fortifications. Photograph: *Wiener Illustrierte* of 4 October 1939.

In a number of areas, carefully planned fortifications, combined with terrain obstacles could effectively halt German advances on 1939. One example are the Polish bunkers at Wizna, whose crew halted the advance of the German XIX Army Corps. In view of the glaring difference in strength, the battle was called the "polish Thermopylae". The Polish commander, Capt. Władysław Raginis, having sworn the oath not to surrender, on 9 September blew himself with a hand grenade.



Officers of the 10th Cavalry Regiment, part of the 10th Cavalry Brigade, in their characteristic black leather overcoats. Photograph from 1938. Photograph: Piotr Sadowski's collection.

The only fully motorized and modernized Polish unit that took part in the fighting was 10th Cavalry Brigade, under Col. Stanisław Maczek. It was meant to be a "Cracow" Army reserve, and it was deployed already on 1 September. Two days later it succeeded in halting a German advance near Jordanów, and in the days to follow it blocked access to Cracow, and continued delaying skirmishes in Podkarpacie and near Lviv. Throughout the campaign it was never destroyed or scattered, it also avoid German captivity and crossed the Hungary border in an organized formation on 19 September 1939.

# DEFENDERS' HEROISM

The border configuration before the campaign gave the Germans the advantage to encircle Poland from their own territory and from Slovakia. In terms of training, combat readiness and determination, the Polish Army was superior to the Wehrmacht. However, the German divisions had more automatic weapons, greater artillery and air force support. Although it was the enemy that had the advantage, the Poles were able to engage them on an equal footing.



Anti-tank company of the 20th Infantry Regiment on parade in Cracow. Photograph: Jerzy Krzewicki's collection.

Already on the first day of the campaign, at Mokra the Volhynian Cavalry Brigade, aided by an armored train, bitterly resisted German armored formations. Polish cavalry men, familiar with the terrain and utilizing well dug-in artillery halted the advance of the elite German 4th Armored Division, which sustained heavy losses. Both at Mokra and in other places, Polish cavalry moving on horseback, but fighting on foot, proved their mobility and effectiveness in combat with the often better equipped enemy.



Mokra. Tachankas with heavy machine guns of the Volhynia Cavalry Brigade. Photograph: CAW.





Camouflaged Polish artillery position on the Hel peninsula. Photograph: R. Witkowski, „Ostatnia reduta”, Gdańsk 1973/Public domain.

One of the longest defenses was that of the Hel Peninsula. Attacked from the south by German infantry, bombed from the air, under fire from German battleships, Hel on for over a month. Furthermore, Hel's artillery effectively fired at German warships, with guns of the cape battery under Capt. Zbigniew Przybyszewski, named after Heliodor Laskowski. The Polish soldiers did not surrender until 2 October, after Modlin and Warsaw fell.

The last large unit of the Polish Army that fought in the campaign was the “Polesie” Autonomous Operational Group under Gen. Franciszek Kleeberg. It was formed on the basis of various detachments that in the first ten days of September tried to force their way to Hungary and Romania, and later tried to relieve the fighting Warsaw. When Warsaw fell, the Group covered long distances fighting both with Soviet and German troops. The last great battle that the Poles won took place at Kock, on 2–5 October 1939. However, in view of the overall situation in the country, it could not succeed. The Poles fought as long as they had the munitions.



Gen. Franciszek Kleeberg. Photograph: Public domain.

# FINAL FIGHTS



After the battle on Bzura. Photograph: NAC.

The Soviet invasion closed the pincers in the east. The only unassailed borders were the short stretches of the border with Latvia and Lithuania, Romania and Hungary. No country could have won such a war, fighting alone in such a geographic configuration. No state could have withstood such blows as those Poland took in 1939. Despite the deteriorating situation, the Poles fought to the end. In the great battles of Tomaszów Lubelski (17–20 and 21–26 September) two Polish armies and troops withdrawing toward the Romanian border were defeated by the Germans. The Poles continued fighting in several places on the Baltic coast, in the Modlin Fortress (until 29 September), and in Warsaw. For a number of days Lviv repelled all the German assaults and did not yield, and only on 22 September it was handed over to the Soviet troops marching from the east in return on the promise to evacuate soldiers and officers from the city. Upon entering Lviv the Soviets broke all the promises.

**D**estruction of Poland in the foreground. The aim is the elimination of living forces, not the arrival at a certain line. [...]

The victor shall not be asked, later on, whether we told the truth or not. In starting and making a war, not the right is what matters, but victory. Have no pity! Be brutal! Eighty million people shall get what is their right. Their existence has to be secured. **Right is on the side of the strongest. Apply utmost severity.**

**Hitler** addressing supreme Wehrmacht commanders, 22 August 1939.

# THE FATE OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION



Women and children seek shelter in the arcades of the Great Theater, Warsaw, September 1939. Photograph: Julien Bryan.



Kazimiera Kostewicz by the corpse of her sister Anna, killed in a German air raid, Warsaw, September 1939. Photograph: Julien Bryan.

One of the witnesses of the fate of the civilian population was the American reporter Julien Bryan, who was in Warsaw from 4 September. He wrote: "The most important element of the story of the siege of Warsaw were not the destroyed buildings or the rifles or German bombers overhead. What was most important in this story was what happened to the ordinary inhabitants of Warsaw, the elderly, the mothers and small children, the thousands of civilian employees[...]."

The civilian population suffered enormous losses in the 1939 campaign. They were a result of the several weeks long fighting that rolled across Poland and the resultant destruction, as well as the bombings of towns and villages. Civilians also died or lost their property during evacuation, fell victim to air raids on congested roads or in trains. Polish citizens were often arrested, and interned for several weeks or even months, and detained in camps on German territory. In eastern Poland, Polish civilians were also attacked by nationalist Ukrainian groups and the communist militia that was being formed on territories occupied by the Soviets.



# GERMAN AND SOVIET CRIMES



Bodies of Polish POWs executed by the Wehrmacht near Lipsko south of Ciepielów, 8 September 1939. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

The murder of Polish POWs from the 74th Infantry Regiment by the Germans at Ciepielów in Mazovia on 8 September 1939 turned into a symbol. Similar scenes took place at Serock, Zambrów or Majdan Wielki near Tomaszów Lubelski. In Częstochowa, in the wake of German repressions over 200 people lost their lives, with 96 shot by the Wehrmacht as alleged insurgents. Similar events took place all over Poland.



Destruction of the Polish border infrastructure by the Soviets, 17 September 1939. Photograph: AIPN.

It is estimated that in military operations the Red Army and the NKVD murdered some 2,500 Polish soldiers, Border Protection Guard members, and policemen in Rohatyń, Grodno, Nowogródek, Sarny, Tarnopol, Wołkowysk, Oszmiana, Świsłocz, Mołodeczno i Kosów Poleski.



Jews searched by German soldiers in Tarnobrzeg market. Photograph: AIPN.

Already in September 1939, the Germans treated the civilian population with extreme cruelty. People were regularly harassed, often brutally beaten or murdered. Particularly notorious was the massacre of Polish Jews organized by an operational group of SS-Obergruppenführer Udo von Woyrsch on 16 September 1939. Two days later after capturing the city, the Germans killed around 600 Jewish inhabitants in an organized manner.

The German troops invading Poland committed atrocities against the conquered population and POWs. Hitler's aim was to crush the nation's spirit and physically liquidate its patriotic elites. The crimes were perpetrated both by rank-and-file Wehrmacht soldiers and by SS and police functionaries in the so-called "operational groups" in various parts of the front. Similar crimes against the POWs and the civilian population were perpetrated by the Red Army and the NKVD.

German SA members dismount the Polish national emblem after capturing Piwniczna. Photograph: G. Wagner, "Sudeten-SA in Polen. Ein bildbericht vom einsatz sudetendeutscher SA-Männer im polnischen feldzug", Karlsbad-Leipzig 1940.



Home Army soldier Jan Nyka "Pantera" cleaning a Polish light machine gun during Operation "Tempest", 1944 r. Photograph: Józef Nyka.

In spite of the lost campaign and the occupation of Polish territory by Germany, the Soviet Union, Slovakia, and Lithuania, the Poles continued fighting for independence. Even when Warsaw was still fighting, on 27 September 1939, the basis for military underground was laid in the form of Service for Poland's Victory, the pillar of the future Polish Underground State. The legal continuity of the institutions of the Polish Republic in the form of institutions reconstructed outside Poland was decisive for the legalism of the organs of underground power in occupied Poland.

Soon, first in France, and later in Great Britain, Polish Army subordinated to the Polish Government-in-exile were rebuilt.



Major Henryk Dobrzański "Hubal" and his soldiers, winter 1939. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

Many Polish soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans and the Soviets, some were interned in the Baltic states, in Hungary and Romania. Most of the prisoners that landed in German POW camps survived the war. Officers captured by the Soviets were systematically murdered in the spring of 1940 at Katyn, Kharkov, Tver (Kalinin) and a number of other places.

Some isolated detachments continued to fight, despite the occupation of Poland, expecting a victorious allied offensive in the west. The one that operated the longest was the Autonomous Detachment of the Polish Army under Maj. Henryk Dobrzański "Hubal", destroyed by the Germans only in April 1940.

# STRUGGLE CONTINUES



Pilots of Squadron 303, 1940. Pilot Officer Mirosław Ferić, Flight Lieutenant John A Kent, Flying Officer Bogdan Grzeszczak, Pilot Officer Jerzy Radomski, Pilot Officer Witold Łokuciewski, Pilot Officer Bogusław Mierzwa (behind Łokuciewski), Flying Officer Zdzisław Henneberg, Sergeant Jan Rogowski, and Sergeant Eugeniusz Szaposznikow. In the middle, behind the group, in helmet and goggles – Flying Officer Jan Zumbach. Photograph: Wikipedia.

Poland never surrendered. Neither to the Germans nor to the Soviets. The Poles were determined to carry on fight against the aggressors. Thus convinced on the night of 17/18 September 1939, the President of Poland and the government crossed the Polish-Romanian border. They believed that their ally would facilitate their free transit to France, where they would be able to continue to exercise power. But the Romanians, in view of the course of the events, decided to intern the Polish government.

On 30 September 1939, Władysław Raczkiewicz was appointed the new president, who was the supreme representative of the Polish state and its citizens. The Republic of Poland remained a belligerent. Thanks to the transfer of Polish government structures to an allied state, the Polish state existed and carried on fighting in the allied camp without interruption, despite of the occupation of its territory by the aggressors.



# SEPTEMBER 1939 IN FIGURES

## POLAND

not fully mobilized deployed

**1,000,000 SOLDIERS**

**4300 GUNS AND MORTARS**

**880 TANKS**

**400 AIRCRAFT**

Polish combat losses

**70,000 SOLDIERS**

Wounded

**133,000**

Taken captive by the Germans

**420,000 MEN**

Combat losses Soviet campaign

**7000 SOLDIERS**

Captured by the Soviets

**250,000**

## THIRD REICH

**1,600,000 SOLDIERS**

**10,000 GUNS AND MORTARS**

**2700 TANKS**

**1300 AIRCRAFT**

## THE SOVIETS

deployed in 17 September

**620,000 SOLDIERS**

**4700 TANKS**

**3300 AIRCRAFT**

German losses

**20,000 SOLDIERS**

killed in combat and missing

Wounded

**37,000**

Red Army losses

**1000 DEAD**

**2000 WOUNDED**

It is estimated that during the fighting and as a result of military operations

And purposeful repressions **300,000** Polish civilians lost their lives

Poland's war of defense against the invaders fought alone **35 DAYS.**

