

Battle Analysis

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## The Invasion of Poland

The Invasion of Poland plays a crucial role in the history of the Second World War as this was the campaign that sparked the greatest conflict in human history. The surprisingly fast success of the Wehrmacht before the Polish Army, in 36 days, turned to be an important asset of the Nazi propaganda machine and meant that the German Armed Forces would be free to face the western allies without the risks of a war on two fronts.

According to classic historiography, the Polish forces failed because they were not up to the standards of the Germany's military. This simplistic explanation forgets the strategic mistakes made by the Polish government and ignores the role played by French and British in the Polish downfall. If the Poles lasted longer were France and England fast enough to mobilize and attack Germany from the west? Which options Poland had and which mistakes lead them to endure an occupation from Germany and the Soviets that lasted fifty years? This battle report will analyze the Invasion of Poland with the aim to explain why the Poles failed and the options they had that could allow them to survive as a nation.

## Strategic Situation

Polish territory by August 1939 was surrounded by Germany and by the URSS, both entities lost territories to the new Polish nation after the end of the First World War (Williamson 6). These territories were mostly inhabited by German or Russian speakers who, in many cases, would gladly join their former nations. Poland was a multicultural country, an amalgamation of three different zones with a non-Polish population of 30% of the total (Williamson 8), or about 22 million ethnic Poles from a total of 34 million Polish citizens (Mawdsley 99). These different ethnic and religious groups defined themselves separately from one another and quite often conflicts among them were solved with violence. (Chodakiewicz 49-50).

The Polish frontiers were not created by the will or determination of the Poles, in a long historic process, but by decisions of the world powers, after the First World War, in maneuvers to weaken and punish Russia and Germany. These frontier arrangements were made without any regards concerning history or self-determination of the local population (Manstein 24). This artificial status was aggravated by the Warsaw refusal to negotiate, surrender territory or make concessions to the far more powerful neighbours.

The Polish Armed Forces faced the same ethnic divisions that plagued the country. Officers talked to each other in Polish, German and Russian. To improve the organisation and training of the army, the Polish government trusted in a French Military Mission (Williamson, 18) that helped the Poles to develop an army under the French doctrine and traditions based in outdated ideas (Manstein 41).

To make things worse, the organisation of the army was responsibility of the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces who were chosen by their political loyalty and

according to territorial districts. This inspectorate was manned by traditionalist officers who refused to cut cavalry budget to allow investments in the army motorization and air force (Williamson 20). While Germans were dreaming about fully motorized formations, the Polish inspectorate, led by the man that would later become the Polish Commander-in-Chief (General Rydz-Śmigły), was discussing which was better: French style fortifications or new ways of mounted warfare (Mirowicz 124).

The importance the Poles gave to their cavalry is expressed by numbers. Polish horse-mounted units were five times the German cavalry units and one-and-a-half times larger than the Soviet and French cavalry (Williamson 21). By the eve of battle, the Poles had eleven cavalry brigades with over five thousand horses each. Albeit proud of their traditions, the combat value of Polish cavalry would prove negligible.

Albeit the difficulties and internal struggles, the Poles tried to develop an armored force, however, they followed the French ideas, that saw the tank as an infantry support weapon, the Poles spread the armored vehicles among foot infantry and mounted cavalry units in a ratio of one company (13 vehicles) for each brigade/division (Williamson 22). The best Polish tanks, however, the French R35 and the TP7, were grouped in three independent tank battalions, amounting 143 vehicles, that were held in reserve (Prenatt 6). When checking the numbers of available vehicles and excluding the obsolete vehicles, like the Renault FT-17, if the Poles followed a Panzer Division structure they would be capable of fielding two full strength armored divisions, with Tankettes, TP7s and R35s, to face the seven Panzer Divisions, equipped mostly with light tanks, assigned for the September attack. On paper the Polish infantry was also to receive an antitank company for each division, however this powerful addition never materialized. (Kennedy 53)

The Polish air force was part of the Army and therefore fought for resources against the other Army branches. While, in 1935, the air force received only 10% of the Army budget, the cavalry accounted for 20% of the total. In the five years before the war, the Luftwaffe received ninety-five times more resources, in US dollars, than the Polish Air Force (Williamson 23). The consequence is that in 1939 of the total 1900 available airplanes in Poland, only 397 could fly and most of them were inferior to German models. As the small numbers of anti-aircraft units were deployed to defend bigger cities, the Polish Army was doomed to fight without any kind of air defense.

As the war got close, the Polish government relied more and more on its western, allies, especially France (Mirowicz 170), which promised vigorous action against Germany in the case of an attack. For France, it was better to keep Poland in this dangerous situation because they believed that if the Poles had to choose between Germany and the Soviet Union, they would choose Germany (Carley 45). The French and British military did not have intentions to fulfill the agreements made by the politicians (Williamson 42) as the only possible western help would be a risky and bloody assault against the Siegfried Line (Manstein 29).

Therefore, even before the start of hostilities the Polish government had already made a series of mistakes that hardly could be fixed on the battlefield:

- 1) Alienation of Germany and URSS, seem as enemies (Mirowicz 170-173), while seeking protection on far away countries, like France and England, who could not interfere in a conflict between Poland and its neighbours. As Germany and URSS aligned to each other, the Polish position was hopeless (Manstein 30);

- 2) Inability to develop a capable Army and Air Force. The traditionalists of the Polish Army were training for the past war and failed to understand the ongoing revolution in military affairs caused by motorization and communications (Williamson 22);
- 3) Refusal to accept any territorial loss. Albeit the country was created by concession of foreign powers, the Warsaw government failed to understand the complexities of their ethnic and territorial problems and hoped to keep this situation by diplomacy alone. (Mirowicz 208-209)
- 4) Polish participation in the demise of Czechoslovakia (Treaty of Munich), with the occupation of a share of Czech territory. Warsaw behaviour strengthened German position while alienated Poland from other eastern countries. (Karski 168-169)
- 5) Incapacity to mobilize the population. The Polish government in fear of provoking Hitler and following French/British appeasement advocates did not mobilize for the war. Several units were under-manned for battle. (Mirowicz 217) (Higgins 55-56)

It must be pointed out that other countries were in the same situation of Poland, like Finland, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, they were pressed between Germany and the URSS. These countries also tried to find refuge in France and Great Britain without any success. They ended up aligning themselves with the Germans to fight the communists by mere lack of better options, Poles faced the same dilemma and ignored the danger of their position. (Mirowicz 200, 202).

## The German Plan

The German plan, named Plan White, was quite simple on paper. By a series of fast blows the objective was to isolate and destroy the mass of Polish forces in the west frontier by a convergent attack with two widely divided pincers that aimed to reach the Vistula river behind Warsaw while leaving the central sector of the frontier on defense stance.

It was necessary to act fast enough to prevent the full mobilization of Poland and the interference of the western powers. To achieve this, the Germans would employ in the first line 43 Divisions: 24 Infantry Divisions, 3 Mountain Divisions, 6 Panzer Divisions, 4 Light Divisions, 4 Motorized Infantry Divisions, 1 Cavalry Brigade and one half-strength Panzer Division (the 10<sup>th</sup>).

In the second to fourth waves there were more sixteen second-rate divisions. For the defense of the west there were more 46 divisions available, but only twelve of them were regular units, facing over 90 French divisions. (Manstein, 34)



Figure 1: The Plan White (Zetterling)

## The Polish Plan

The Polish mistrust on its western allies, after the Austrian and Czech crisis, prompted Poland to spread the Army units close to the German border. Warsaw expected another French/British appeasement treaty if the Germans demanded only 'parts' of Poland to sign another peace agreement. On the other hand, a most important aspect of the Polish strategy was an expected French/British support attack within fifteen days of mobilization, The Polish expected that the border with other neighbours would be in peace and, also, hoped that delivery of war materiel would be possible via URSS (Mirowicz 233). Since the start, the plan had a major flaw, Polish survival depended too much on foreign governments, governments that Warsaw could not trust entirely.

For the defense, General Rydz-Śmigły demanded that all fronts should be equally strengthened, regardless of importance, even after the Polish intelligence identified the enemy's main points of effort. While the Germans were concentrating its most formidable units in their main routes of attack the Polish command was spreading its units in an over extended defensive front (Mirowicz 244-245). Manstein, after studying the Polish documents, was unable to understand the Polish defense: "It is difficult to decide the strategic aim of Polish deployment, unless it was based on a wish to 'cover everything and surrender nothing'" (Manstein 40) or "an obvious attempt to hold the entire country" (Kennedy 56). While "the defensive positions consisted mainly of earthen entrenchments and were not ready when needed" (Kennedy 55).

To mount this frontier defense, the Poles had 30 Infantry Divisions, 11 Cavalry Brigades and 2 Motorized Brigades. Albeit a considerable force most weapons dated from the First World War like the French artillery 75mm guns (Kennedy 53). To make things

worse, this force would be spread in a frontier of over 1,800 kilometers. According to the US Army Infantry Battalion Manual of 1944, an Infantry Battalion frontage in terrain with good natural obstacles should never exceed 3.2 kilometers (FM 7-20 190). If we consider that the 41 Polish divisional level units could field 6 full strength battalions each (while keeping 3 on reserve), the Polish Army could only defend a frontage of 787 kilometers while keeping the two motorized brigades as strategic reserves.

Not surprisingly von Manstein cites General Weygand, former French Military Advisor in Poland, who suggested the Poles to build internal defensive positions using the rivers Vistula, Narew and Niemen, among others, to avoid encirclement and neutralize the German mobility advantage. This defensive line would be around 600 kilometres long (Manstein 42), an adequate length for the Polish strength. This plan was refused, as surrendering territories to the invasion forces were out of question. The thin line of defense along the frontier, without any depth and an absence of a second line of defense, was to be another Polish's leadership outstanding errors. (Mirowicz 236)

## The Battle

September 1<sup>st</sup> the war began. German leadership initially were not so confident if they would achieve the objective to destroy the Polish formations before the crossing of the Vistula river, however, two new, and not completely expected, factors succeeded. The first one was the penetration of armored forces deep in the Polish defenses, the second one was the collapse of the Polish communication system and Air Force which was rendered ineffective by the successful attacks of the Luftwaffe. (Manstein 54)



In the north, the mobility of the German formations led by Heinz Guderian closed the Polish Corridor in September 4th and entrapped three infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade that were cut from the rest of Poland (Guderian 72-73). The Polish deployment of several units in a try to hold the corridor was a questionable decision (Kennedy 56). In just three days, the Polish intent to defend the border proved to be a complete failure. Attempts to reopen the corridor failed as the attack of the local cavalry brigade was shattered in a series of charges against armor, when mounted lancers attacked tanks (Kennedy 82). Or as Guderian recalls: "The Polish Pomorska Cavalry Brigade, in ignorance of the nature of our tanks, had charged them with swords and lances and had suffered tremendous losses." (Guderian 72)

Warsaw's central government abandoned the city in September 7<sup>th</sup>, not before issuing an order that the capital was to be hold at all costs. In the South front, September 9<sup>th</sup>, the first pocket of the war was closed with the encirclement and later destruction of seven Polish divisions (Manstein 55). During these events, the Polish command refused to relegate the authority to local commanders and thus contributed to the ongoing chaos in Polish forces. While the plan to retreat the border units to inner defenses could not be materialized by inferior mobility and inadequacy of communications (Mirowicz 266-269).

On September 16th, Guderian's Corps closed the pincer on the south of Brest-Litovisky and isolated Warsaw from the rest of the world. This encirclement also isolated the best Polish units. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, Guderian's panzer and motorized units conquered Brest-Litovisky, east of Warsaw, and the Polish government was forced to flee again. The German forces had advanced over 600 km in two weeks.

In Brest-Litovisky the Germans received the news that the Russians were advancing to meet them (Guderian 82). Also, the Polish command were surprised by the Soviet invasion and decided to flee to Romania on September 18<sup>th</sup> (Mirowicz 297). On September 20<sup>th</sup> Manstein reports the destruction of two more pockets of resistance, in the Battle of Bzura, the biggest of the campaign, with the elimination of nine infantry divisions, three cavalry brigades and elements of another ten different divisions after a failed Polish attempt to counter-attack. (Manstein 58)

As Rydz-Śmigły had ordered Warsaw to be defend to the last man, the last intact elements of the Polish forces where positioned inside the city for a last stand. The Germans dropped leaflets and gave the civilian population time to flee (Kennedy 109). After bombings by the Luftwaffe and field artillery regiments, Warsaw capitulated on September 27<sup>th</sup>, where more 120,000 prisoners were captured. (Manstein 56).

The last Polish gamble came with the attempt to create a “Bridgehead” close to the Romanian border, there the Poles hoped to build a defensive position and wait for the French offensive. However, after the Soviet intervention the Poles lost all hope and decided to leave for Romania and then to France to rebuild an army in exile.

It is interesting to mention the French role in the Polish disaster. While promoting the Polish irreducible diplomatic attitude towards Germany and the URSS and giving several guarantees of support for the Polish defense, the French never really intended to act on their behalf. After the fall of France, the Germans captured several documents from the French government to the Polish military attaché in Paris, there the French General Gamelin, commander of the French Army, states that “more than half our regular divisions in north-east are in action. Since we crossed the frontier the Germans have been resisting

energetically...There has been aerial warfare from the onset...we are conscious of having a considerable part of the Luftwaffe against us" (Manstein 46). In the direst moment the French was lying to their allies.

## Conclusion

The invasion of Poland was the first strikingly success of the Wehrmacht in the war. Albeit not a Blitzkrieg in a classical term, Guderian's XIX Army Corps was composed of one Panzer and two Motorized divisions, this formation showed enough mobility and shock power to succeed in deep penetrations in the Polish lines and showed the tactical ability that was later to be used in France. The new war of movement was first demonstrated, enemy units bypassed by the armor were engaged and eliminated by infantry units following the tanks. (Kennedy 84)

However, the Invasion of Poland was not an easy task. The German Army lost a total of 8082 dead, 27278 wounded and 5029 missing in 36 days of operations. Also, 217 tanks were lost and about 400 airplanes destroyed. The numbers of tanks destroyed, and personnel lost, is equivalent to equip two full strength Panzer Divisions, of the seven that participated in the hostilities.

The Poles were meant to lose this war. This was not caused by absence of courage or determination from the part of the Polish soldier, but mainly by the very bad decisions taken by the Polish Government in the previous years and during the battle. As cited above, Poland did not accept the option to abandon parts of its territory to build an adequate defensive line. While the limited resources available were wasted in building an

obsolete army, based in an outdated doctrine. The last mistake was that, contrary to Polish belief, their allies did not have the will to help at all.

Modern historians try to whitewash or aggravate some situations that happened during the invasion of Poland. Among the issues widely debated are the bombing of Warsaw, the Polish cavalry charge against tanks and the western responsibility in the fall of Poland.

According to the documents used on this report, the Polish government decision to defend Warsaw at all costs added more suffering to the population. The German command relied on artillery and bombers to force the city's surrender and this contributed to the legend that Nazis ordered the destruction of a defenseless city. Curiously, the French learned this lesson and, months later, during French defeat, declared Paris an open city and, therefore, saved their capital from unnecessary destruction.

The texts used confirm the incident where the Polish cavalry attacked armored vehicles with lances. This episode is now-a-days deemed as a myth by modern historians (Mawdsley 100), however, after studying the kind of leadership the Poles had in the war, someone can only believe that a cavalry charge against tanks was very possible, even if used as a last option.

Also, western historians whitewashed the British and French influence on Polish disaster as a "minor factor" (Mawdsley 100). In truth, this was a very important factor, as western governments pushed Poland against its neighbours and later failed to act when Poland were invaded. If Poland knew beforehand there was no other option, they would seek refuge in either Hitler or Stalin. The same western policy towards Poland was reaffirmed again when the west let Stalin occupy the country by the end of WW2.

Finally, the lessons of the Polish campaign show that if the Poles had applied an reasonable diplomatic policy towards its neighbours, while developing a modern doctrine and realistic strategic plans, the Second World War would be very different. Maybe in the end Poland would be defeated anyways, but this war would be much costlier for the attackers and, maybe, Poles would have survived as an independent nation.

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