The war in Europe, 1939–41

The campaign in Poland, 1939

The German conquest of Poland in September 1939 was the first demonstration in war of the new theory of high-speed armoured warfare that had been adopted by the Germans when their rearmament began. Poland was a country all too well suited for such a demonstration. Its frontiers were immensely long—about 3,500 miles in all; and the stretch of 1,250 miles adjoining German territory had recently been extended to 1,750 miles in all by the German occupation of Bohemia-Moravia and of Slovakia, so that Poland's southern flank became exposed to invasion—as the northern flank, facing East Prussia, already was. Western Poland had become a huge salient that lay between Germany's jaws.

It would have been wiser for the Polish Army to assemble farther back, behind the natural defense line formed by the Vistula and San rivers, but that would have entailed the abandonment of some of the most valuable western parts of the country, including the Silesian coalfields and most of the main industrial zone, which lay west of the river barrier. The economic argument for delaying the German approach to the main industrial zone was heavily reinforced by Polish national pride and military overconfidence.

When war broke out the Polish Army was able to mobilize about 1,000,000 men, a fairly large number. The Polish Army was woefully outmoded, however, and was almost completely lacking in tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and antitank and antiaircraft guns. Yet many of the Polish military leaders clung to the double belief that their preponderance of horsed cavalry was an important asset and that they could take the offensive against the German mechanized forces. They also tended to discount the effect of Germany's vastly superior air force, which was nearly 10 times as powerful as their own.

The unrealism of such an attitude was repeated in the Polish Army's dispositions. Approximately one-third of Poland's forces were concentrated in or near the Polish Corridor (in northeastern Poland), where they were perilously exposed to a double envelopment—from East Prussia and the west combined. In the south, facing the main avenues of a German advance, the Polish forces were thinly spread. At the same time, nearly another one-third of Poland's forces were massed in reserve in the north-central part of the country, between Łódź and Warsaw, under the commander in chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. The Poles' forward concentration in general forfeited their chance of fighting a series of delaying actions, since their foot-marching army was unable to retreat to their defensive positions in the rear or to man them before being overrun by the invader's mechanized columns.

The 40-odd infantry divisions employed by the Germans in the invasion counted for much less than their 14 mechanized or partially mechanized divisions: these consisted of six armoured divisions; four light divisions, consisting of motorized infantry (infantry wholly transported by trucks and personnel carriers) with two armoured units; and four motorized divisions. The Germans attacked with about 1,500,000 troops in all. It was the deep and rapid thrusts of these mechanized forces that decided the issue, in conjunction with the overhead pressure of the Luftwaffe, which wrecked the Polish railway system and destroyed most of the Polish Air Force before it could come into action. The Luftwaffe's terror-bombing of Polish cities, bridges, roads, rail lines, and power stations completed the disorganization of the Polish defenses.

On September 1, 1939, the German attack began. Against northern Poland, General Fedor von Bock commanded an army group comprising General Georg von Küchler's 3rd Army, which struck southward from East Prussia, and General Günther von Kluge's 4th Army, which struck eastward across the base of the Corridor. Much stronger in troops and in tanks, however, was the army group in the south under General Gerd von Rundstedt, attacking from Silesia and from the Moravian and

Slovakian border: General Johannes Blaskowitz's 8th Army, on the left, was to drive eastward against Łódź; General Wilhelm List's 14th Army, on the right, was to push on toward Kraków and to turn the Poles' Carpathian flank; and General Walther von Reichenau's 10th Army, in the centre, with the bulk of the group's armour, was to deliver the decisive blow with a northwestward thrust into the heart of Poland. By September 3, when Kluge in the north had reached the Vistula and Küchler was approaching the Narew River, Reichenau's armour was already beyond the Warta; two days later his left wing was well to the rear of Łódź and his right wing at Kielce; and by September 8 one of his armoured corps was in the outskirts of Warsaw, having advanced 140 miles in the first week of war. Light divisions on Reichenau's right were on the Vistula between Warsaw and Sandomierz by September 9, while List, in the south, was on the San above and below Przemyśl. At the same time, the 3rd Army tanks, led by Guderian, were across the Narew attacking the line of the Bug River, behind Warsaw. All the German armies had made progress in fulfilling their parts in the great enveloping maneuver planned by General Franz Halder, chief of the general staff, and directed by General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief. The Polish armies were splitting up into uncoordinated fragments, some of which were retreating while others were delivering disjointed attacks on the nearest German columns.

On September 10 the Polish commander in chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, ordered a general retreat to the southeast. The Germans, however, were by that time not only tightening their net around the Polish forces west of the Vistula (in the Łódź area and, still farther west, around Poznań) but also penetrating deeply into eastern Poland. The Polish defense was already reduced to random efforts by isolated bodies of troops when another blow fell: on September 17, 1939, Soviet forces entered Poland from the east. The next day, the Polish government and high command crossed the Romanian frontier on their way into exile. The Warsaw garrison held out against the Germans until September 28, undergoing terror-bombings and artillery barrages that reduced parts of the city to rubble, with no regard for the civilian population. The last considerable fragment of the Polish Army

resisted until October 5; and some guerrilla fighting went on into the winter. The Germans took a total of 700,000 prisoners, and about 80,000 Polish soldiers escaped over neutral frontiers. Approximately 70,000 Polish soldiers were killed and more than 130,000 wounded during the battle, whereas the Germans sustained about 45,000 total casualties. Poland was conquered for partition between Germany and the U.S.S.R., the forces of which met and greeted each other on Polish soil. On September 28 another secret German–Soviet protocol modified the arrangements of August: all Lithuania was to be a Soviet sphere of influence, not a German one; but the dividing line in Poland was changed in Germany's favour, being moved eastward to the Bug River.

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The Baltic states and the Russo-Finnish War, 1939–40

Profiting quickly from its understanding with Germany, the U.S.S.R. on October 10, 1939, constrained Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to admit Soviet garrisons onto their territories. Approached with similar demands, Finland refused to comply, even though the U.S.S.R. offered territorial compensation elsewhere for the cessions that it was requiring for its own strategic reasons. Finland's armed forces amounted to about 200,000 troops in 10 divisions. The Soviets eventually brought about 70 divisions (about 1,000,000 men) to bear in their attack on Finland, along with about 1,000 tanks. Soviet troops attacked Finland on November 30, 1939.

The invaders succeeded in isolating the little Arctic port of Petsamo in the far north but were ignominiously repulsed on all of the fronts chosen for their advance. On the Karelian Isthmus, the massive reinforced-concrete fortifications of Finland's Mannerheim Line blocked the Soviet forces' direct land route from Leningrad into Finland. The Soviet planners had grossly underestimated the Finns' national will to resist and the natural obstacles constituted by the terrain's numerous lakes and forests.

The western powers exulted overtly over the humiliation of the Soviet Union. One important effect of Finland's early successes was to reinforce the tendency of both Hitler and the western democracies to underestimate the Soviet military capabilities. But in the meantime, the Soviet strategists digested their hard-learned military lessons.

On February 1, 1940, the Red Army launched 14 divisions into a major assault on the Mannerheim Line. The offensive's weight was concentrated along a 10-mile sector of the line near Summa, which was pounded by a tremendous artillery bombardment. As the fortifications were pulverized, tanks and sledge-carried infantry advanced to occupy the ground while the Soviet Air Force broke up attempted Finnish counterattacks. After little more than a fortnight of this methodical process, a breach was made through the whole depth of the Mannerheim Line. Once the Soviets had forced a passage on the Karelian Isthmus, Finland's eventual collapse was certain. On March 6 Finland sued for peace, and a week later the Soviet terms were accepted: the Finns had to cede the entire Karelian Isthmus, Viipuri, and their part of the Rybachy Peninsula to the Soviets. The Finns had suffered about 70,000 casualties in the campaign, the Soviets more than 200,000.

The war in the west, September 1939–June 1940

During their campaign in Poland, the Germans kept only 23 divisions in the west to guard their frontier against the French, who had nearly five times as many divisions mobilized. The French commander in chief, General Maurice-Gustave Gamelin, proposed an advance against Germany through neutral Belgium and the Netherlands in order to have room to exercise his ponderous military machine. He was overruled, however, and French assaults on the 100-mile stretch of available front along the Franco-German frontier had barely dented the German defenses when the collapse of Poland prompted the recall of Gamelin's advanced divisions to defensive positions in the Maginot Line. From October 1939 to March 1940, successive plans were developed for counteraction in the event of a German offensive through Belgium—all of them based on the

assumption that the Germans would come across the plain north of Namur, not across the hilly and wooded Ardennes. The Germans would indeed have taken the route foreseen by the French if Hitler's desire for an offensive in November 1939 had not been frustrated, on the one hand, by bad weather and, on the other, by the hesitations of his generals; but in March 1940 the bold suggestion of General Erich von Manstein that an offensive through the Ardennes should, in fact, be practicable for tank forces was adopted by Hitler, despite orthodox military opinion.

Meanwhile, Hitler's immediate outlook had been changed by considerations about Scandinavia. Originally he had intended to respect Norway's neutrality. Then rumours leaked out, prematurely, of British designs on Norway—as, in fact, Winston Churchill, first lord of the Admiralty, was arguing that mines should be laid in Norwegian waters to stop the export of Swedish iron ore from Gällivare to Germany through Norway's rail terminus and port of Narvik. The British Cabinet, in response to Churchill, authorized at least the preparation of a plan for a landing at Narvik; and in mid-December 1939 a Norwegian politician, Vidkun Quisling, leader of a pro-Nazi party, was introduced to Hitler. On January 27, 1940, Hitler ordered plans for an invasion of Norway, for use if he could no longer respect Norway's neutrality.

After France's failure to interrupt the German conquest of Poland, the western powers and the Germans were so inactive with regard to land operations that journalists began to speak derisively, over the next six months, of the "phony war." At sea, however, the period was somewhat more eventful. German U-boats sank the British aircraft carrier Courageous (September 17) and the battleship Royal Oak (October 14). The U-boats' main warfare, however, was against merchant shipping: they sank more than 110 vessels in the first four months of the war. Both the Germans and the British, meanwhile, were engaged in extensive mine laying.

In surface warfare at sea, the British were on the whole more fortunate than the Germans. A

German pocket battleship in the Atlantic, the Admiral Graf Spee sank nine ships before coming to a tragic end: having sustained and inflicted damage in an engagement with three British cruisers off the Río de la Plata on Dec. 13, 1939, she made off to Montevideo and obtained leave to spend four days there for repairs; the British mustered reinforcements for the two cruisers still capable of action after the engagement, namely the Ajax and the Achilles, and brought the Cumberland to the scene in time; but, on December 17, when the Graf Spee put to sea again, her crew scuttled her a little way out of the harbour before the fight could be resumed.

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The invasion of Norway

British plans for landings on the Norwegian coast in the third week of March 1940 were temporarily postponed. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, however, was by that time convinced that some aggressive action ought to be taken; and Paul Reynaud, who succeeded Édouard Daladier as France's premier on March 21, was of the same opinion. (Reynaud had come into office on the surge of the French public's demand for a more aggressive military policy and quicker offensive action against Germany.) It was agreed that mines should be laid in Norwegian waters and that the mining should be followed by the landing of troops at four Norwegian ports, Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, and Stavanger.

Because of Anglo-French arguments, the date of the mining was postponed from April 5 to April 8. The postponement was catastrophic. Hitler had on April 1 ordered the German invasion of Norway to begin on April 9; so, when on April 8 the Norwegian government was preoccupied with earnest protest about the British mine laying, the German expeditions were well on their way.

On April 9, 1940, the major Norwegian ports from Oslo northward to Narvik (1,200 miles away from Germany's naval bases) were occupied by advance detachments of German troops. At the same

time, a single parachute battalion (the first ever employed in warfare) took the Oslo and Stavanger airfields, and 800 operational aircraft overawed the Norwegian population. Norwegian resistance at Narvik, at Trondheim (the strategic key to Norway), at Bergen, at Stavanger, and at Kristiansand had been overcome very quickly; and Oslo's effective resistance to the seaborne forces was nullified when German troops from the airfield entered the city.

Simultaneously, along with their Norwegian enterprise, the Germans on April 9 occupied Denmark, sending troopships, covered by aircraft, into Copenhagen harbour and marching over the land frontier into Jutland. This occupation was obviously necessary for the safety of their communications with Norway.

Allied troops began to land at Narvik on April 14. Shortly afterward, British troops were landed also at Namsos and at Åndalsnes, to attack Trondheim from the north and from the south, respectively. The Germans, however, landed fresh troops in the rear of the British at Namsos and advanced up the Gudbrandsdal from Oslo against the force at Åndalsnes. By this time the Germans had about 25,000 troops in Norway. By May 2, both Namsos and Åndalsnes were evacuated by the British. The Germans at Narvik held out against five times as many British and French troops until May 27. By that time the German offensive in France had progressed to such an extent that the British could no longer afford any commitment in Norway, and the 25,000 Allied troops were evacuated from Narvik 10 days after their victory. The Norwegian king Haakon VII and his government left Norway for Britain at the same time. Hitler garrisoned Norway with about 300,000 troops for the rest of the war. By occupying Norway, Hitler had ensured the protection of Germany's supply of iron ore from Sweden and had obtained naval and air bases with which to strike at Britain if necessary.

What was to happen in Norway became a less important question for the western powers when, on May 10, 1940, they were surprised by Hitler's long-debated stroke against them through the Low

Countries.