

# **POLISH DEFENSIVE WAR OF 1939 AN OVERVIEW AFTER 80 YEARS**

**1939 – 2019**

**Alexander M. Jablonski**

## **Prologue**

The 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II brings many reflections. As a Pole by birth I had been brought up in the deep love to my home country and also to her armed forces as majority of men in my family served in the Polish Armed Forces and fought in both World Wars and in the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1921. This is typical for many Polish families in the last century. World War II left a deep wound in the Polish nation. The defeat of September 1939 campaign was very special. The results of it are felt to the present day not only in every family but also in the life of the Polish nation as the whole.

World War II was the largest military conflict in the contemporary world history. Military operations covered several continents and involved 61 countries and many nations. It divided the war into two fighting camps: axis forces of Berlin - Rome -Tokyo and allied forces (with some changes after 1941). The war lasted six years from September 1, 1939 (the German invasion of Poland) to September 4, 1945, marked by the surrender of Imperial Japan, and Europe by the capitulation of Germany on May 8 and 9, 1945. In different countries the beginning of this war is different and it depends on the date of actual access to the fight. The main reason of this war was the continuous German attempts to break the Versailles treaty, which established a new world and especially European order in 1919. This treaty limited any advances in building of the German armed forces and reduced substantially military production capabilities under control of the Allies. Germans broke step by step these limitations. The most dramatic took place in 1933 after Adolf Hitler's gained the parliamentary victory and became the chancellor blessed by the aging marshal von Hindenburg. His socialistic national worker's party (NSDAP) became quickly a mono-party and its leader became *fürher* with absolute dictatorial power. Hitler made subsequent military moves towards its neighbours. He took Rhineland in 1933, made Anschluss of Austria and annexed Czech Sudeten region between March 1938 and March 1939, took over the control of the Lithuanian important harbour of Klaipėda (Kłajpeda). Then following the occupation of Czechoslovakia, he created the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and supported the creation of the Slovak fascist state led by the priest Jozef Tiso.

Any attempts to stop expansion of Hitler's Germany were completely unsuccessful. The highest mistake was made by England in 1938. The western democracies faced the Hitler's expansion with hesitation and also using very dangerous approach of appeasement at any cost.

Poland tried to establish her international policy based on the non-aggression treaties signed with the Soviet Russia in 1932 and with Germany in 1934, a year before the death of Pilsudski one of the fathers of the Polish Second Republic in 1918 and the winner of the Polish-Bolshevik War of

1919-1921. Poland also tried to create a bloc of the Baltic states as well as Small Entente group of states. Though Poland established relatively friendly relations with Latvia and Estonia, and also with Hungary and Romania, most of her neighbours kept a distance.



Prime-ministers of France, Great Britain and Italy, Georges Clemenceau “Tiger”, David Lloyd George and Vittorio Orlando in Versailles, June 1919 (Wikipedia)

During the München crisis of 1938, Poland as well as, Hungary, made some moves. Poland regained small territory near Cieszyn (Teschen) (from the Czech territory) and Hungary a small part of Carpathian Mountains (from Slovakia).

In 1939 the Polish foreign minister Jozef Beck’s policy of balance between the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union collapsed. He tried to defend the Polish *raison d’être*. Poland signed the Polish-Soviet pact of non-aggression on July 25, 1932 and the declaration of not using the force in the mutual relations between Poland and Soviet Russia on January 26, 1934. After the death of Marshal Pilsudski on May 12, 1935, Poland started slowly (too slowly) the modernization of its armed forces. In general, Poland based its army on the power of infantry and relatively well armed cavalry (which had a long historical tradition). The latter was proved well in the fast military movements during the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919-1921. These choices were based on the old French military doctrine. One must realize that France helped to rebuild Polish Army during and

later after WW I. The Polish Military Academy was modelled on the French École spéciale militaire de Saint-Cyr. Until 1928 most of professors and even academy commanders were French. Majority of the Polish general staff officers were also graduated from various French military schools. The Polish Intelligence provided very good secret information about steady improvements of armies of both opponents of Poland: Germany and the Soviet Union. In the middle of the 30-ties Poland made first steps to correct its defense plans and started to consider seriously the danger of first attack from the East by the Soviet Union and later in 1938 from the West. Poland built the Central Industrial System in the middle of the country with the series of modern plants including armoury plants. Finally, some real progress was made in the design of unique Polish planes and also tanks. Poland completed its first big sea port called Gdynia with the modern harbour of the Polish Navy. They started also to build fortifications along long and complicated Polish border with Germany. The government made accelerated effort to modernize an old fortress of Modlin in the Central Poland and started modernization of air force, artillery and cavalry.



General Giulio Douhet (1869 – 1930) – Italian general and an air power theorist, a proponent of cooperation of all armed forces in the future modern wars (Wikipedia)

The Polish General Staff led by General Wacław Stachiewicz understood well the impossible task in defending such complicated border and eventual attack from three directions after the fall of the Czechoslovakia and creation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and the fascist state of Slovakia. Poland also made very concentrated effort to extend the military treaties with France and Britain and ask for guaranties of her Western border. They asked for immediate action from both Western Allies in case of the German invasion of Poland. It was granted first by the British Government and later by France. However, these guaranties were granted in the final forms just before the outbreak of the war. The Western Allies established secret talks with both opponents of

Poland. Both attempts of them failed. The Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany signed on August 23, 1939, the non-aggression pact with a secret protocol, dividing the Central and Eastern Europe into two zones of influence: Russian and German. It sealed the future fall of the II Polish Republic created in 1919 after 123 years of non-existence of the Polish state.

At that time there were two important war doctrines in Europe. The first was proposed by Italian General Giulio Douhet who believed in the three-dimensional warfare strategy for armed forces: air force in the air, land forces on the land, and the navy on the sea. He said that they should act in the harmony, but giving to the air force the leading striking force without any warning to the enemy. The second one was proposed by British Major-General John Frederick Charles Fuller. Despite his controversial ideas and membership in the British Union of Fascists after leaving the army, he was the well-recognized expert and proponent of the armored weapon and he understood very well the future dominance of the panzer fist at any future war theatre. He published extensively as a military expert and strategist. The German doctrine of the future *Blitzkrieg* and their other massive campaigns was based on the combinations of these two doctrines by Douhet and Fuller, with dominant force left to the air force. Both doctrines were known to Polish General Staff strategists but they could not push them through in the post-Pilsudski era and it was not much time left for them<sup>1</sup>.



General-Major John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878 – 1966) - British war strategist and expert, a proponent of the panzer forces in the modern warfare, British fascist and controversial figure (Wikipedia)

Germans prepared the *Fall Weiss*, the plan for the *Blitzkrieg* campaign in Poland. It was prepared by two exceptional German strategists: General Günter Blumentritt and General Erich von Manstein. They served under command of the General Gert von Runstedt, the Commander of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Henryk Piątkowski – „Kampania wrześniowa w Polsce 1939”, seria Polska Historia II Wojny Światowej, Wyd. Światowego Związku Polaków z Zagranicy, pp. 87 (+ mapy), Londyn 1946

Army Group South in Silesia. Polish plan called *West* (in Polish *Zachód* or simply Plan “Z”) was prepared with a genuine effort by Major General Tadeusz Kutrzeba, for a long time the Commander of the Polish General Staff Academy (in Polish *Wyższa Szkoła Wojenna*), and during the September 1939, the Commander of the Poznań Army and his staff members with exceptional support of Colonel Stanisław Lityński and others. German plans were ready in spring 1939 and the Polish defense Plan “Z” had crystallized during 1938.



General of Infantry (General der Infanterie) Günter Blumentritt (1892 – 1967) - the author of the *Fall Weiss* plan of the 1939 campaign in Poland, and later French campaign of 1940, the exceptional German modern military strategist and expert, after the war helped to build modern *Bundeswehr* during Cold War era and cooperated closely with Americans (Photo anonymous, *Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany* )

Based on the remarkable victory over Bolsheviks in 1920, Poland chose the old version of the war strategy with moving cavalry and infantry. The important new role of mechanized forces (panzer divisions, artillery and air force) was never fully implemented. The Polish military did not pay much attention to the building and use of the armoured divisions or massive attacks by the modern air force units. The real shock came during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, which proved the importance of the harmonized use of air force with other forces. The Polish leaders associated with post-Pilsudski era did not see it and they believed much in the old French war strategy. They counted on the West Allies. This proved to be a fatal mistake for Poland. The time was working against the Poles and promised military and financial aid almost completely had not materialized. The tragic future events destroyed hopes not of one generation but several of them, including my first post-war generation doomed to live under brutal Soviet domination (in fact other form of the occupation). However, the military strength is also associated with the morale and spirit of the army. The Polish army, was well-trained and had an exceptional spirit and belonged to the best armies of that times. The German army was better mechanized and had a very strong fire power

but at the level of small units, the Poles were superior fighters. All of that was due to the very good Polish military education at the officer and non-commissioned officer levels of all segments of Polish armed forces, land forces, cavalry, the Navy and the Polish Air Force. Poland also had an excellent network of Reserve Officer Colleges. The Polish Officer corps was also relatively well trained for war conditions.



Major General Tadeusz Kutrzeba (1886 – 1947) -

Polish General and military strategist, Commander of the Polish General Staff Academy (Wyższa Szkoła Wojenna) (1928 – 1939), Commander of the Army “Poznań” and later the Deputy Commander of the Group of the Warsaw during the September 1939 Campaign. The P.O.W. in Germany, liberated by the British, died on exile in England  
(Photo anonymous, *Instytut Polski im. Gen. W. Sikorskiego, London, England*)

Comparing combat abilities, the Polish army was not too far from those of the German army, despite its superiority in the military technology, but even that was not always the case. The major shortcoming of the Polish forces was too small panzer (armoured) forces but the Polish infantry was well equipped including anti-panzer guns. Anti-panzer guns were introduced also in the cavalry brigades as standard equipment. The Polish Air Force was outdated and it did not have enough modern planes (a small number of middle range bombers called “Łoś” just entered an initial production before the war). Poland had 150 modern light tanks (7TP light tank produced in Poland) and 30 French light-middle tanks R-35. Poland would have had minimum 1500 middle tanks 7TP, which could match German PzKpfw I (Panzerkampfwagen I) and even PzKpfw II (which were the main armoury of the German panzer divisions in Poland). Despite these shortages, the Polish army entering the WW II was the largest army in the Polish military history. This army could find their modern replacement in the Polish Armed Forces fighting in the Western front alongside with Allied forces. The Polish army had two portions like all armies of that era: the professional core army and the army of reservists. All Polish regiments had three words on their

military banners: *God, Honour and Country – Bóg, Honor i Ojczyzna*. The Polish army was one of the most colorful armies in the world. This army was the emanation of the Polish ambitions, not only military but also ambitions of the state, and its morale was one of the best in the contemporary world. However, on the battle field the highest decisive characteristic was the panzer force and air force. Polish forces did not match German forces in these two types of armoury. The highest core of the military officers was based on former soldiers from the Polish Legions fighting on the Austro-Hungarian side during WWI and about 70% of them came from the so-called First Brigade commanded by Marshal Piłsudski. They did not have much learned military skills in comparison, to the well-trained German generals of Prussian origin. The result of that was one, the painful defeat.

### **Overview of the Polish Defensive War of 1939**

Adolf Hitler took the final decision of the attack after signing the v. Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact on August 23, 1939 in Moscow. The secret protocol dividing the Eastern and Central Europe into two zones of influence, divided also Poland. It was called the Fourth Partition of Poland in the last century.



Brigadier-General Józef Albin Wiatr (1889 – 1977), during 1939, Colonel Dipl., Chief of the I Division of the Polish General Staff, the author of the Polish mobilization plan “W”, in the September 1939 campaign Deputy Chief of the III Division of the Staff of the Polish Commander-in-Chief. A skillful Polish high ranked officer, also in KOP (Border Defense Corps). Took part in the Polish Legions, and later fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919-1921. He made a military career in the interwar Poland. Interned in Romania, he managed to escape and joined the Polish Forces in the Middle East. After the World War II, Commander of the Polish troops in the Middle East. Settled and died in England

(Photo before 1934 in the Colonel KOP uniform - Wikipedia)

Poland managed to implement in the remarkable way, the secret mobilization of its core professional army in the several steps. The quiet “card mobilization” started in March 1939, when Poland rejected three German demands from March 21, 1939:

- To agree that Gdańsk (Danzing) will be incorporated to the III Reich;
- To agree for the construction of the highway (under German supervision) connecting East Prussia with the rest of Germany;
- Poland will join the anti-Komitern pact against Soviet Russia.

Then the outbreak of the war was obvious to the military but the society did not believe in it. The spirit was high and everybody had denied this option. Similar feeling prevailed on the West.

The Polish Marshall Edward Rydz-Śmigły, Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, ordered the following steps:

- To organize the system of the command of Polish Army for the preparation of the war in the West (against Germany) based on the plan “Z”;
- To strengthen Polish divisions stationed on the Western border by the draft of one year;
- To start the first quiet “card” mobilization.

The subsequent six months represented the typical war of nerves between two nations. Poland did not allow to be provoked and accelerated its war preparations. On August 13, 1939, the next step of the quiet “card” mobilization got started. Because of the increase of the German forces stationed close to the Polish border, the Chief Commander ordered the next step of the quiet “card” mobilization for August 23, 1939. The mobilization (Plan “W”) was organized by the Command I of the General Staff (under the supervision of Col. Dipl. Józef Wiatr). On August 29, 1939 the universal mobilization of all drafted recruits was declared. Great Britain and France tried to put some pressure to annulate this mobilization despite their allied agreements with Poland. The separate mobilization orders were given to the Air Force, Anti-Craft Defense and the Navy. The disposition of opposite forces are on Map I.

Poland managed to mobilize more than 75% of its Armed Forces before the outbreak of the war, and next 10 % were mobilized during first three days of the war. During the second day of the Polish universal mobilization, on September 1, 1939, on 4:40 am, the war operations started on the whole front line with Germany and also with Slovakia on the Southern Polish border. From the Polish side it was defense war to the last bullet. On 4:47 am the old German panzer cruiser *Schleswig-Holstein* started heavy bombardment of the Polish garrison on Westerplatte on the mouth of the Vistula river in the Free City of Gdansk. The German Air Force of almost 2500 aircrafts, started the heavy bombardment of main Polish cities (including all civilian objects) and almost all railway station hubs in the whole Western and Central Poland. This heavy attack was directed also to civilian population based on Adolf Hitler’s order to annihilate Poland, to kill the Poles without mercy and terrorize the whole nation. The Polish Army returned the fire on the almost whole border especially in the Corridor, the border with East Prussia, and the continuous massive heavy attack on Silesian border and advances through Carpathian border.





Polish Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły (1886 – 1941), Commander-in-Chief of Poland's armed forces in Polish campaign of September 1939, politician, statesman, and also painter and poet. A general in the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1921, had a quick military career on the Marshall Piłsudski side, Inspector-General of the Polish Armed Forces (1935 – 1939). During the September 1939 campaign he directed the Polish defense until September 18, 1939 and after crossing the border he was interned in Romania. He secretly escaped from Romania to Hungary in 1940 and later managed to reach Poland where he died suddenly of heart attack on December 2, 1941, buried in Warsaw with different name (Photo, *Gazeta Polska*, 1938)

German High Command organized for its attack, two groups of armies: Army Group South under command of Colonel-General (later he became Field Marshall) Gerd von Rundstedt, and Army Group North under command Colonel-General Fedor von Bock. Both of them belonged to the old Prussian nobility, with tradition of serving army and state. They were not strict followers of the Nazis, but under Adolf Hitler both of them became one of his best generals during entire World War II. The execution of the plan *Fall Weiss* was performed skilfully by Field Marshall and the Supreme Commander of the German Forces, Walther von Brauchitsch born into an aristocratic Prussian military family. Thus, he was a perfect commander at that time to conquer without any mercy Poland.

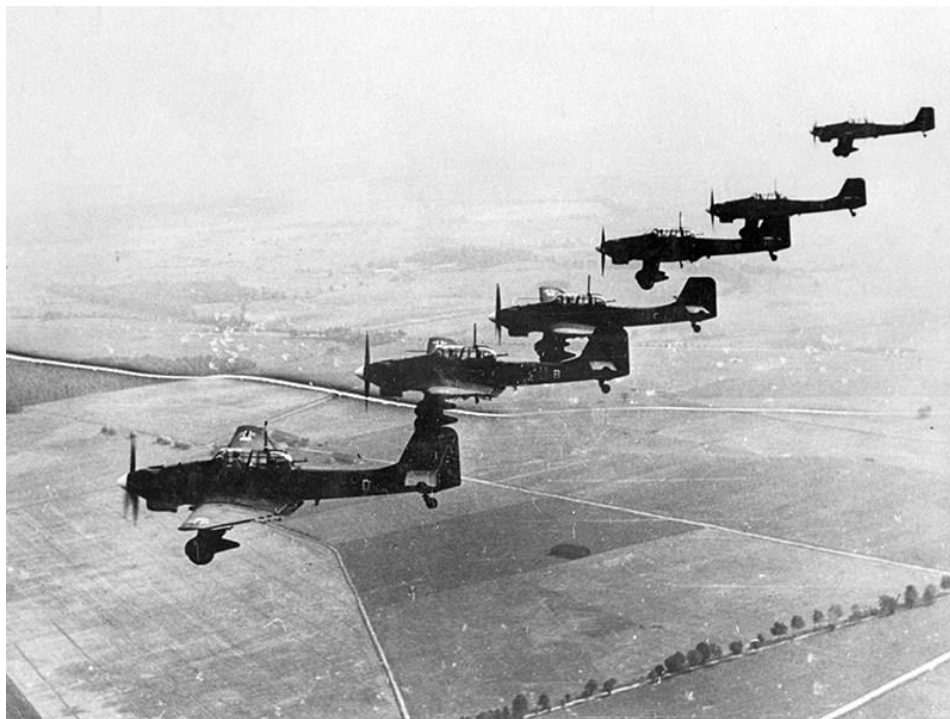
The German forces had superior advantage, especially in the area of a massive air force aircrafts, (almost entire *Luftwaffe* was used) and also in mechanized armoured divisions. On September 3, 1939 after failure of diplomatic attempts to stop German invasion, Great Britain and France declared the state of the war with Germany. Canada as the part of the British Empire also declared the war against Germany. The world public opinion was shocked and this was the beginning of World War II. The Allies did not make any move to open the Western front, which was left completely opened to them.



German Field Marshall Walther Heinrich Alfred Hermann von Brauchitsch (1881 – 1948), the Commander-in-Chief of the German Army during World War II. Born into a Prussian aristocratic military family, he was one of the most talented German army generals. He opposed Anschluss of Austria and also intervention in Czechoslovakia. He was in charge during massive invasions of Poland in 1939, and of France in 1940. He supported all harsh measures against the Polish population and followed strictly ideology of *Lebensraum*. He was dismissed from his seat after failure of the Russian campaign and after the war, he was charged with war crimes against humanity by Allies. He died in the British military hospital in Hamburg before he could be prosecuted (Photo E. Bieber, c. 1938, German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv), Bild 183-2004-0105-500)

They started so-called the “phoney war”, the last attempt to appease Germany and reduced this conflict to the regional war on the cost to their one ally - Poland. The Western front was kept silent during the Polish campaign. The Western Allies did not fulfill their guaranties to Poland. Poland was left alone in her heroic fight against the German invasion and from September 17, also against the Soviet invasion.

There are different estimates of numbers of troops fighting on both sides in the Polish defensive war of 1939. It is assumed that Poland was attacked from the land, sea and air, by 65 German great tactical regiments (organized in two large Army Groups – North and South, 2 air fleets (of *Luftwaffe*), and the Navy force called *Ost*.



Formation of the German Ju 87 Stuka light dive bombers (a single-engine, two-man aircraft, making characteristic sound of spreading terror) over Poland during the September 1939 campaign  
(Photo from Bundesarchiv – German Federal Archives )

Germany used in the attack 1,850 thousand soldiers, about 2,800 tanks and armoured vehicles, about 10,000 artillery guns, and a massive air force of about 2,085 aircrafts (bombers and fighter planes – however some other sources say that about 3732 aircrafts<sup>2</sup> were used (including about 700 observation aircrafts)). Poland managed to mobilized over 1,000 thousand of soldiers, about 880 tanks and armoured vehicles, about 400 planes, and a very small sea fleet on the Baltic Sea (reduced by the evacuation of destroyers to England on August 30). The small 50 thousand corps of Slovak forces participated in the attack from the Carpathian Mountains side<sup>3</sup>. It is assumed that the ratio in each type of forces was as follows: in infantry 1.4 : 1, in armoured units 10 : 1, in cavalry 1 : 8 (better on Polish side), separate artillery units (outside of regular division level) 3 : 1, automobile transportation 16 : 1<sup>4</sup>. German forces had large advantages over Polish forces, especially in the air and in the armoured and mechanized units. They supposed to be used to destroy the well-prepared for fight Polish infantry regiments. Polish regiments did not have enough anti-tank artillery to counter this attack. Poland did not have any chance to win this fight and the Polish High Command knew it including Commanders of all Polish seven Armies spread over the long thin defense lines and defending these lines in the first part of this mortal campaign. These lines

<sup>2</sup> Jan Rudnicki - „Słowa i czyny”, nakładem autora i czytelników, Toronto 1965

<sup>3</sup> Stanisław Komorowski, Zygmunt Bielecki, Wanda Bigoszewska, Adam Jońca - „Wojna Polska – Barwa i Broń – 1939 – 1945”, Wyd. Interpress, Warszawa 1984

<sup>4</sup> Józef Lityński - „Polskie doświadczenia kampanii wrześniowej 1939 roku z dzisiejszej perspektywy”, maszynopis, Montreal 1995.

had some fortifications but some were not fully completed before the outbreak of the war on September 1.



Polish tank 7TP (siedmiotonowy polski – 7-tonne Polish) produced in 1935 – 1938, tested in the Błędowska dessert, near Dąbrowa Górnicza (The PIBWL Military Site – Photo by anonymous author).  
Weight: 9.4 tonne; Crew: 3; Armor: 37 mm anti-tank gun (Bofors licence), heavy machine gun 7.9 mm;  
Armor: 17 mm front and sides; Engine: 1 Saurer BDDL Diesel 6-cylinder engine with water coolant,  
110 HP; Speed: 32 km/h; Obstacles: 1.70 vertical.

On the Polish side on September 1, 1939, there were 21 infantry divisions, 8 brigades of cavalry, and only one armoured brigade (under command of Col. Stanisław Maczek (later Brig.-Gen.) ready to fight along the front lines. 5 other infantry divisions and 2 brigades of cavalry completed their mobilization by September 4 and moved to the action. Poland put effectively 26 infantry divisions, 10 brigades of cavalry and 1 armoured brigade at the first line of the defense.

The Polish front was defended by 6 armies from the North to South:

Army “Pomorze” (est. March 23, 1939) – Major-General Władysław Bortnowski

Army “Poznań” (est. March 23, 1939) – Major-General Tadeusz Kutrzeba

Army “Łódź” (est. March 23, 1939) – Major-General Juliusz Rómmel

Army “Modlin” (est. March 23, 1939) – Major General Kruk-Przedzimirski

Army “Kraków” (est. March 23, 1939) – Brigadier-General Antoni Szylling

Army “Karpaty” (est. July 11, 1939) – Major-General Kazimierz Fabrycy

later on September 7, it was renamed as Army “Małopolska”

There were also 5 operational groups (“Narew”, “Kutno”, “Polesie”, “Tarnów” and “Wyszków”). Some of them were created also in March 1939 and some during the campaign itself. There was also one reserve group in the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief and after September 10, 1939 (very late) four Army Groups were established (but not fully): Group Army “Warszawa”, Group

Army “Poznań”, Group Army defending Romanian bridgehead commanded by Lieutenant-General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, and also Group Army of Major-General Stefan Dąb-Biernacki (never fully materialized). Polish armies were concentrated in the natural groups: center (from the South – Army “Kraków”, Army “Łódź”, Army “Poznań”, and Army “Pomorze”), Northern wing (Army “Modlin” and Operational Group “Narew”) and Southern wing (Army “Karpaty”).

The most famous operational group called “Polesie” was created on September 9, 1939 and fought his last battle in Kock area at the beginning of October 1939 (surrendered as the last greater Polish regiment on October 5, 1939). Brigadier-General Franciszek Kleeberg was a commander of group “Polesie”.

On the other side, Germans had initially, on the Polish front: about 60 great military units (they directed to this direction all of their armoured divisions, all light divisions, and all motorized divisions). At the West front (French direction), they had about 25 great units, on the South, about 10, and in the reserve about 15 greater units. Finally, they concentrated about 70-72 great units against Poland (31 – 32 infantry divisions, 18-19 infantry reserve divisions, 5 divisions (of *Landwehr*), 4 motorized divisions, 4 light divisions, 7 armoured divisions and 1 cavalry brigade)<sup>5</sup>. German military units formed two main groups of land armies: Group Army “South” – Commander Colonel-General Gerd von Rundstedt (his Chief-of-Staff, Lieutenant-General von Erich Manstein) and Group Army “North” – Supreme Commander of Land Forces, General v. Brauchitsch (Chief-of-Staff General of Artillery Franz Halder). There were three armies in Group Army “South”, commanded respectively, XIV Army, by Colonel-General Wilhelm List, and X Army by General of Artillery Walter von Reichenau, and finally VIII Army by General of Infantry Johannes Albrecht Blaskovitz. There were two armies in Group Army “North” commanded respectively, IV Army by General of Artillery Günther von Kluge, and III Army by General of Artillery Georg von Küchler. The main Commander of the attack was Adolf Hitler himself with Chief-of-Staff of the General Command General Wilhelm Keitel<sup>6</sup>. The German had advantage based on their plan to cut Poland with two pincers and attacking with massive combination of the armoured divisions with heavy bombardment using almost whole *Luftwaffe*. It was a combination of two strategies, never used before, and developed by British General John F. C. Fuller and Italian General Giulio Douhet.

The German invasion started with breaking by German well-equipped armoured divisions through the Polish forces distributed first at the long border defense lines. In Silesian front, Polish lines were close to the border, but in the Northern Poland, the defense lines were located deeper in the Polish territory. The Polish corridor had a relatively small defense force. The Polish forces were able with some losses to withdraw to the central Poland and tried to stabilize the second line of the defense along the Vistula, San and Narew rivers. This attempt to some extent also failed, but the Polish forces were able to make strong attacking maneuver in the center front, trying to attack near Bzura river advancing forces to Warsaw. After the fierce fighting of the joined two Polish armies

---

<sup>5</sup> Henryk Piątkowski – „Kampania wrześniowa w Polsce 1939”, seria Polska Historia II Wojny Światowej, Wyd. Światowego Związku Polaków z Zagranicy, pp. 87 (+ mapy), Londyn 1946

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem

“Poznań” and “Łódź” under skillful command of General-Major Tadeusz Kutrzeba, they were partially defeated but some of their units managed to push through to Warsaw. This opened the second phase of the campaign when the High Polish Command under Marshall Śmigły-Rydz lost its commanding capabilities. When they moved to the city of Brest, the Polish High Command lost its capability of quick communication with fighting force.



The 37-mm Polish anti-tank guns (Bofors licence) taking positions near Warsaw during the 1939 campaign (called Polish-Swedish gun killers – Polish Army had 1,200 37 mm anti-tank guns in 1939) (Wikipedia)

The second part of the campaign was associated with fierce fighting of isolated Polish centres of defense (including Hel peninsula, Warsaw, “Modlin” fortress) and fighting of different groups of the rest of the army. During the whole campaign the Polish Army fought many larger and smaller battles against larger German forces. There were many examples of valour of the battle field, both, by individual soldiers as with smaller fighting units (at the different level of command) as well as at the larger fighting units at the level of regiments, operational groups, and armies. The whole regiments some time got destroyed in the ruthless fight. Four Polish generals were killed in the combat on the field of honour: Brigadier-General Mikołaj Bołtuć (1893 – 1939), Commander of the Operational Group “Wschód”, Brigadier-General Józef Kustroń (1892 – 1939), Commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Mountain Infantry Division, Operational Group “Bielsko”, Army “Kraków” and Brigadier-General Stanisław Grzmot-Skotnicki (1894 – 1939) and Brigadier-General Franciszek Seweryn Wład (1888-1039), Commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Commander of the Pomeranian Cavalry Brigade. During the whole war Poland lost 68 generals (more got killed by

Soviets). There were 19 thousand Polish officers held as the POWs by Germany (including 33 generals).



Polish anti-aircraft flak 75 mm gun, an improved Model 1929 Bofors gun, taking position in the defense of Warsaw in September 1939 (Wikipedia)

The example of great endurance in fighting in the slow withdrawal towards the new planned line of defense was shown by Army “Kraków” under the careful command of Brigadier-General Antoni Szylling. He managed to save some of his troops until two final battles near Tomaszów Lubelski fought between September 15 – 20 and later between September 21 - 27. They were called by the French sources as two battles near Tomaszów Lubelski. First one fought bravely by the remaining units of Army “Kraków” and Army “Lublin” and the second one, fought by the remaining elements of Army “Lublin”, Army “Modlin” and other Operational Groups “Wyszków” and “Narew” and also courageous the Nowogródzka Cavalry Brigade fought under the command of Brigadier-General Krukowicz-Przedzimirski and less fortunate Brigadier-General Stefan Dąb-Biernacki. In the first one the Warsaw Motorized Armoured Brigade under the command of Colonel-Dipl. Stefan Rowecki showed exceptional performance with TP7 Polish light tanks. The major problem of Polish operation was lack of communication. General Piskor did not know about planned attack of General Dąb-Biernacki North-East from Tomaszów Lubelski. These battles were second large attack of Polish forces after the battle of Bzura. These attempts failed and these units were unable to join forces of the Romanian bridgehead. Thousand of Polish soldiers and officers were killed (including Brigadier-General Józef Kustroń, who killed on the field of honour near Dzikowiec where he led his 21th Mountain Division during the night fight on September 15-16 (at the beginning of the first battle of Tomaszów Lubelski).



Major-General Antoni Szylling (1884 – 1971), considered together with Generals Wiktor Thommé and Stanisław Maczek as one of the most successful Polish Army commanders during the Polish defensive war of 1939. Born to the Polish family of Bavarian barons. He participated in WWI on the side of Russia, later joined the Polish 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps on the East and fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919-1921. He made the military career in the interwar Poland and was nominated the commander of Army “Kraków”, the main pivot of the Polish defense in Silesia. He followed tactics of the “continuous fight during the retreat”. Fought the second largest battle of the campaign together with Army “Lublin” near Tomaszów Lubelski and surrounded by the dominated German forces on September 20, he capitulated with his staff, and was taken to the German custody. Liberated by Americans from Oflag VII-A Murnau, he went to France, and later to the UK. Then, he emigrated to Canada and settled in the farm in Abercorn, near Montreal. He died in 1971 and is buried in Saint-Sauveur, QC

On September 17, 1939 the Red Army entered Poland alongside the whole Eastern border. In this invasion took part about 800 thousand soldiers grouped in two waves: the first wave of 620 thousand regular army and the second wave of 180 thousand of Czeka security forces (in Russian - Всероссийская Чрезвычайная Комиссия), to take over Polish Government installations and sites in the Eastern Poland. Stalin gave the order to invade Poland after cease-fire with Japan on September 15, 1939 (which took effect the next day). The Soviet Union invaded Poland with the brute force on September 17. It was met with small resistance of the Polish Border guard forces (called KOP) under the command of Brigadier-General Wilhelm Orlik-Rückemann (1894-1986. The so-called Romanian bridgehead was during its final formation stage under command General Kazimierz Sosnkowski (1885-1869) (called also as the Southern front, mainly near City of Lwów).



In the middle of the campaign the French Military Mission on September 16, informed the Polish General Command that the French offensive, which supposed to start on September 17, was moved to September 20. It never happened and on September 17, the Soviet invasion of Poland got started. On September 18, 1939, the President of Poland, the Commander-in-Chief with the Polish Government crossed Romanian border and was subsequently interned. Romania declared the neutrality in the Polish-German conflict and in fact broke the Polish-Romanian alliance.



Brigadier-General Wilhelm Orlik-Rückemann (1894 – 1986), Polish General, precursor of armored forces in Poland, during the Polish defensive war Commander of the Polish Border Protection Corps (Korpus Ochrony Pogranicza – KOP). KOP protected 450 km of Eastern border of Poland with the Soviet Union. He led heroic fight against Bolsheviks around Szack and city of Wytyczno on September 28-29, 1939. After the campaign escaped to Sweden via Lithuania and died and buried in Ottawa, Canada (Photo before 1933, in the uniform of Colonel, NAC).

In the end of September 1939, the last stands of the Polish Army were in Hel peninsula, at the fortress “Modlin” and the bloody defense of Warsaw. Warsaw capitulated on September 28, Modlin on September 29 and Hel on October 2, 1939. The last battle fought during the September campaign was the battle of Kock, was fought skilfully by Brigadier-General Franciszek Kleeberg. He was Commander of the Operational Group “Polesie”. This was his last victory. All of his battles during the 1939 campaign were victorious. He died of his heart failure while in the German captivity.



Major-General Franciszek Kleeberg (1888 – 1941). One of the most prominent Polish Generals, graduate of the Austro-Hungarian and French Military Academies. Born to the Polish noble family of military tradition of Swedish roots, settled in Poland after Swedish invasion of Poland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. An officer of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army, and of Polish Legions. Participated in the WWI and in the Polish-Bolshevik War in 1919-1920. During interwar period went through military in the Polish Army. Close friend of General Władysław Sikorski. Commander of the reserve forces of the Operational Group “Polesie”. After his last victorious battle in Kock, taken by Germans as a POW. Died in the captivity near Dresden in 1941 (Photo from the 30-ties in the Brigadier-General uniform - Wikipedia).

A number of regiments in relatively good shape, despite some losses, crossed different borders. For example, the soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division under skillful command of Col. Stanisław Maczek, after difficult fights in the Southern part of the defensive retreat of the Army “Kraków”, crossed the Hungarian border. There were a number of other smaller regiments including almost 8,000 fighter pilots and air force ground support personnel, which consisted of almost 70% of the evacuated Polish Air Forces (first to France and later to Britain)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Józef Zając – *Dwie Wojny – Mój udział w wojnie o Niepodległość i w obronie powietrznej Polski*, t. I i II, Katolicki Ośrodek Wydawniczy „Veritas”, t. 63 serii czerwonej „Biblioteki Polskiej”, Londyn 1964.



Colonel Dipl. Stanisław Maczek (later Brigadier-General) and his staff officers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Brigade (who initially was part of the Army "Kraków", and later moved to newly created formation of Army "Małopolska") in Wysoka, near Łańcut, during the September 1939 campaign (Photo from the website RedisBad<sup>8</sup>)

Some regiments crossed the Lithuanian border and was interned. The panic ignited in the Polish population by the heavy German bombardment, blocked all main roads. It reduced chances for concentration of the steadily reduced armed forces. The main source of transport was the rail system and it was heavily disrupted by attacks of *Luftwaffe*. This was also a sense of monumental defeat and last defensive centers of Poland disappeared slowly towards the end of September.

The darkest and heaviest occupation of Poland by her two brutal enemies started and it lasted for six years in case of German occupation and 54 years for Soviet occupation until 1993, when the last Soviet soldier left the Polish soil.

### **Final Remarks**

This is very difficult task to assess the lost campaign of 1939 because during the Soviet occupation most of the studies had to follow the official line and there is profound lack of the good monographic effort on the Polish military effort during the WWII. However, some publications even during this period, were very unique and their overall quality including the aspect of

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.redisbad.pl/redisbad-histerycznie-genera-stanisaw-maczek-ojciec-polskiej-broni-pancernej->

intervention of the Communist censorship element varied substantially. Some interesting accounts and memoirs were published in Polish and also in German describing this campaign from both sides. This must be said that the Western historiography has not spent too much time on this issue. The assumption of the establishment the starting date of the war depended heavily where this assumption was taken. The Polish cause was unpleasant to everyone due to many attempts to appease the Soviet Union and welcomed it fully to the camp of Allies of the Second World War. The nations behind the Iron Curtain were forgotten and their historiography did not exist for the long time. Even in our times, it is rare to attempt truthful historical studies of the beginning of the World War II.

There are some estimates on Polish and German losses during the September 1939 campaign. The most interesting assessment was finally made in the extensive study published in 1999 by the National Remembrance Institute (editor T. Panecki)<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Polish campaign 1939 losses:**

#### **Poland**

Killed in action	95,000 - 97,000 (including died of wounds and not accounted)
Wounded	130,000.
Not accounted	Lack of information
German captivity	587,300 (German sources claimed – 694,000) In October and November 1939, Polish Jewish POW's, and Polish-German POW's were released, 17,420 POW's of Polish-Ukrainians and Polish-Byelorussians were handed in to the Soviet Union
Soviet captivity	452,500 Polish soldiers were captured by Soviets (out of this number about 200,000 were sent to Gulag and other camps)

In general, number of interned soldiers (including officers) were in Romania about 30,000, in Hungary about 40,000, and in Lithuania and Latvia about 17,000 (about 12,000 of them was forced to be transferred to the Soviet Union).

#### **Germany<sup>101112</sup>**

Killed in action	17, 106.
------------------	----------

<sup>9</sup> *Militarny udział Polski w II wojnie światowej. Bilans, wnioski i doświadczenia*, Praca zbiorowa (red. Tadeusz Panecki), Warszawa 1999 (cyt. w pracy *Polska 1939 – 1945 – Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupcjami* (red. Wojciech Materski i Tomasz Szarota, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Warszawa 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Wermacht Zentralstatistik*, Stand 30.11.1944, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (BA-MA RH 7/653)

<sup>11</sup> *Raport Oberkommando der Luftwaffe („Wojna Obronna Polski 1939)*, KAW, Warszawa 1979)

<sup>12</sup> Fritz Hahn – *Waffen und Geheimwaffen des Deutschen Herres 1933 – 1945*.

(all three above cited after Wikipedia – Kampania wrześniowa (in Polish)

[https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kampania\\_wrze%C5%9Bniowa#cite\\_note-20](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kampania_wrze%C5%9Bniowa#cite_note-20)

Wounded	36, 995.
Not accounted	486.

### **Soviet Union<sup>13</sup>**

Killed in action	1,600.
Wounded	2,600.
Not accounted	302.

### **Slovakia<sup>14</sup>**

Killed in action	18.
Wounded	50.

The losses do not include losses in civilians and they were substantial on the Polish side due to the war conditions in the whole country.

The Second Polish Republic was a multinational country and statistical data published by Central Statistical Bureau (Główny Urząd Statystyczny) on January 1, 1939 is as follows<sup>15</sup>:

35.1 mln Polish citizens of various national background (territory – 389,600 km<sup>2</sup>)

- 24.58 mln Poles 70.2 %
- 4.89 mln Ukrainians 13.9 %
- 3.35 mln Jews 9.5 %
- 1.13 mln Byelorussians 3.2 %
- 0.80 mln Germans 2.3 %
- 0.15 mln Russians 0.4 %
- 0.11 mln Czechs 0.3 %
- 0.09 mln others 0.2 – 0.3%

The Polish Army reflected the above presented mosaic and in the Polish Army Chaplaincy were represented all followers of different faith like Christian Orthodox, protestants (mainly from Evangelical-Augsburg Church and Polish Calvinists), Judaism, Islam (Polish Tatars) and Karaims. All of them had chaplains in the pre-war Polish Army and most prominent of them including all High Chaplains of the Polish Army were killed by Soviet NKVD during Katyn massacre in 1940. All of them fought for Poland against both invaders and paid the highest prize.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem

<sup>15</sup> *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 1939*, Warszawa 1939 [cyt. z pracy zbiorowej *Polska 1939 – 1945, Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami*, red. Wojciech Materski i Tomasz Szarota, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN, Warszawa 2009

Some minorities members betrayed Poland especially during the invasion of the Red Army and in the following it the Soviet occupation of the Eastern Poland (Kresy). In some cities and villages, it had a massive character in case of the young Jews who joined NKVD in hunting for Polish intelligentsia, Polish military and all level of Polish officials, including teachers and professors from higher educational institutions. The German minority took part in sabotages and also killing of Polish citizens in the pre-planned action especially in Polish Pomerania. This sad indications of treason and lack of loyalty was very painful at the end of the September 1939 campaign. This requires careful studies of showing not only results but also organizers of these actions.

Poland fought with courage and bravery for over one month. France with much larger army including substantial armored forces and the air force fought 4 weeks in the 1940 campaign, Denmark was taken in 4 hours, and Norway in about two weeks. The Polish soldier fought much better than German soldier but Germany had a substantial domination of the armoured divisions and the brutally acted air force, bombing all country and shooting civilians. They did not follow the Geneva Convention in this brutal war.

It is also important to mention that the Polish military spending reached 40 % of the Polish annual spending of the government budget between 1936-1939 (approx. 2.3 B Polish Zł). This very interesting data is provided by Col. Dipl. Henryk Piątkowski in his study from 1946<sup>16</sup>.

The main reasons of the defeat during the September 1939 campaign could be summarized as follows:

1. Difficult geopolitical situation of Poland in 1939 and the possibility of attack from three directions after taking over Czechoslovakia in 1938 by Hitler's Germany;
2. Much smaller industrial potential of Poland in comparison of both Hitler's Germany and Soviet Russia, despite attempts to balance it by enormous effort of the Polish government;
3. The Polish Western front was organized between two monumental pincers of the major German forces located along Prussian border and also along Silesian border and as well Slovakian border;
4. Not enough modernization of the Polish Armed Forces (too small number of modern aircrafts and tanks) as the result of the much weaker Polish economy.
5. Lack of good pre-planning of the formation of armies to counter the well-designed German concept of so-called immediate war – *Blitzkrieg* derived after military strategy of Generals Douhet and Fuller). The combined attack from the air and on the land by well-equipped armored and motorized units.

The positive conclusions could be also drawn as follows:

1. The determination of the whole Polish nation and its political leaders (started from the time of German pressures and demands in 1938-39);
2. The determination of the Polish Armed Forces and their commanders at every level of command;
3. A very good and well-performed elastic mobilisation plan, which resulted of the mobilisation of almost 80 % of the Polish Army together with pre-planned evacuation of the Air Force after the first part of the campaign and also small but modern Polish Navy.
4. Relatively good operational plan of the campaign to counter not only German dominance but also the very difficult strategic situation of the Polish defense;

---

<sup>16</sup> Henryk Piątkowski – „Kampania wrześniowa w Polsce 1939”, seria Polska Historia II Wojny Światowej, Wyd. Światowego Związku Polaków z Zagranicy, pp. 87 (+ mapy), Londyn 1946 (dane dot. polskiego budżetu państwowego z lat 1933-1939 z *Małego Rocznika Statystycznego 1939* )

5. The ability of the Polish High Command to improvise brave responses like the Polish counterattack near Bzura river (also called the battle of Kutno) between September 9-22, 1939 and the attempt to create the strong Romanian bridgehead, which failed because of the Russian invasion of September 17, 1939;
6. Heroism of the individual Polish soldiers and their commanders with contempt to death. They tried to counter their disadvantages in military equipment and also in the communication.

The price paid by Poland was enormous and it should present a warning to current military alliances not to change any planned coalition war to the destruction of one of the brave allies. In case of Poland the bravest ally of the bravest in the world military history.



Polish poster from the beginning of the WW II by M. Żuławski  
(issued by the Polish Government in Exile) (Wikipedia)





Young Polish girl Kazimiera Mika mourns her dead elder sister following German air attack in Warsaw, September 1939 (Photo by Julien Bryan, American war correspondent)

Today we pay our tribute to the Polish Soldiers and to many civilians who got killed during this tragic campaign.

## Lest we forget!