

POLAND
1939

Also by Roger Moorhouse

*The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin,
1939–1941* (2014)

Berlin at War (2012)

POLAND 1939

THE OUTBREAK OF
WORLD WAR II

Roger Moorhouse

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POLAND 1939
On the Eve of War





POLAND 1939
German and Polish Troop Dispositions
and the German Plan

 Polish armies
 German armies
 German line of attack



Red Army Invasion of Poland
17 September 1939

-  Soviet armies
-  Red Army line of attack
-  Polish KOP (Border Defence Corps) units

POLAND DIVIDED

Poland under German and Soviet occupation
September 1939–June 1941



-  Annexed to the Reich
 -  General Government
 -  Administered by Lithuania
 -  Annexed by the U.S.S.R.
 -  Poland's pre-war frontier
- Occupied by Nazi Germany

AUTHOR'S NOTE

WRITING ABOUT A REGION WITH SHIFTING FRONTIERS AND MIXED populations can sometimes be a challenging task. For simplicity, in this book I have employed a policy of using names appropriate to the period under scrutiny. If the modern name differs from that, then it will be given in brackets at first mention.

So, to take the example of what is now the Ukrainian city of L'viv: in September 1939, it was the Polish city of Lwów, so it will be rendered here as Lwów (L'viv) at first mention, and simply as Lwów thereafter. No political statement is thereby intended.

In addition, where there is an accepted Anglicized form—such as Warsaw, Brest, or Moscow—then I have naturally used it throughout.

Polish words look complicated, but their pronunciation is consistent. All vowels are of even length, and their sound is best rendered by the English words “sum” (*a*), “ten” (*e*), “ease” (*i*), “lot” (*o*), “book” (*u*), and “sit” (*y*). Most consonants behave in the same way as in English, except for *ć*, which is pronounced “ts”; *ǰ*, which is soft, like the *y* in “yes”; and *w*, which is equivalent to an English *v*. The stress in Polish always falls on the penultimate syllable.

Author's Note

There are also a number of accented letters and combinations peculiar to Polish, such as:

ą = nasal *a*, hence *Piątek* is pronounced “piontek”

ę = nasal *e*, hence *Łęczycza* is pronounced “wencytsa”

ó = *u*, hence *Kraków* is pronounced “krakoov”

ci = *ch* as in “cheese”

ć = *ch* as in “cheese”

cz = a longer *ch*, as in “catch”

ch = hard *h*, as in “loch”

ł = English *w*, hence *Katuzyn* is pronounced “kawooshin”

ń = soft *n*, as in Spanish “*mañana*”

rz = soft *j*, as in French “*je*”

si = *sh* as in “ship”

ś = *sh* as in “ship”

sz = a longer *sh*, as in “sheer”

ż = as *rz*, as in French “*je*”

ź = similar to *ż*, but harder.

PREFACE

THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN EUROPE BEGAN AT DAWN ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1939.

It shouldn't need saying, of course, but the date of the start of the largest war in human history is a subject that is shrouded in confusion across the globe. Every combatant nation has its own narrative and chronology. In China and Japan, for instance, the war is held to have begun on July 7, 1937, when Japanese and Chinese forces engaged following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. For Americans, the war started on December 7, 1941, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; everything before that date is merely a curious, far-off prelude to the main event. Sometimes, such dissenting views are entirely justifiable, dictated by geography and convention; sometimes they are more mendacious. In the Soviet Union (and in its successor state, Russia), for example, the fiction has long been maintained that the Second World War began only with the German attack on June 22, 1941. Stalin's earlier invasions of Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States have been skillfully airbrushed from the popular narrative.

Even the British and the French—and their respective former empires—are less than entirely clear on the issue. Though both countries

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declared war on Hitler's Germany on September 3, 1939, after the Germans' failure to withdraw from Poland, they did nothing to aid their ally, shamefully leaving Poland to its fate. Thereafter, for the people of Britain and France, nothing much happened until German forces smashed westward across the French border in May 1940. The British called that intervening period the "Phoney War"; the French, the "*Drôle de Guerre*"—the "funny war."

But there was nothing funny—or phony—about the war that Poland fought in the autumn of 1939. As the sun rose on September 1, Hitler's forces crossed the Polish frontier from the north, west, and south, hurtling forward in their tanks and trucks and on foot, while the Luftwaffe scoured the skies, bombing and strafing seemingly with impunity. After little more than two weeks, with Polish armies in disarray and lacking any assistance from their western allies, the coup de grâce was delivered by Hitler's new confederate, Stalin, and the Red Army invaded from the east on September 17. As German and Soviet forces met on Polish soil and declared their eternal brotherhood—conveniently forgetting the preceding decade of rabid antipathy—Poland entered a new totalitarian dark age: a world of persecution, misery, and death. By the end of the Second World War, one in five Poles would be dead.

Poland, then, was—in that neat slogan devised by its wartime propagandists—"First to Fight." Its defensive campaign in September 1939 opened the Second World War in Europe: a five-week struggle that prefaced nearly 300 weeks of slaughter. It cost as many as 200,000 lives on all sides and showcased many of the brutal practices that would feature so strongly in the later conflict: the targeting of civilian populations, indiscriminate aerial bombing, and mass killings.

Invaded and occupied by Europe's two preeminent totalitarian powers, Poland would be exposed to every horror that modern conflict could devise. Just as the Wehrmacht unleashed a race war against the Poles in the west, so the Red Army imported class war in the east. Poland's citizens would be sifted and sorted, with those deemed undesirable subjected to arrest and deportation if they were lucky, state-sanctioned murder if they were not.

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The Polish campaign also had a significance well beyond that country's frontiers: it brought Britain and France into the war. The two Western allies had guaranteed Poland's territorial integrity in the spring of 1939 in a vain attempt to halt German expansion. Consequently, it was this defense of Poland—however nominally interpreted—that transformed the war from a Central European squabble into a conflict of worldwide significance.

Bearing all of this in mind, it would be fair to expect that Poland's brave, brief war of 1939 might be well known. But it is not—it has been all but forgotten outside Poland. Despite our collective obsession with all aspects of the Second World War, the "September campaign" always seems somehow to fall through the cracks, ignored or passed over in a few sentences. Consequently, it is barely known or understood in the English-speaking historiography.

A glance at some of the most popular history books of the past few years should serve to illustrate the point. Whereas enthusiastic readers can peruse competing volumes on the Ardennes campaign, Dunkirk, or D-Day, they would search in vain for much modern scholarship on Poland's war of 1939. Aside from a couple of specialist military studies, the last book devoted to the subject, Nicholas Bethell's *The War Hitler Won*, was published in 1972.

General works are little better. An examination of popular histories of the Second World War reveals the scale of the problem. On average, out of some 700 pages of text, they devote just 16 to the defense of Poland in 1939, which often include the wider matter of the entry into the war of Britain and France. Some ignore the subject entirely or are almost comically Anglocentric, describing the outbreak of the war by referring solely to Whitehall politics while making no mention of the very real battles then being fought on Polish soil. Moreover, those that examine the subject in anything more than a cursory manner tend to rely almost entirely on German sources: the usually self-serving memoirs of those who participated in the invasion, and the often turgid regimental histories of the German army that tend to make nonmilitary historians' eyes bleed. The results are predictably myopic: historians

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repeat Nazi propaganda tropes almost verbatim, ignore the Soviet invasion entirely, and shamefully write the Poles out of their own history.

Yet the real problem is more profound. History, as we know, is written primarily by the winners. As Hitler pithily put it on the very eve of the Polish campaign, “The victor will never be asked if he told the truth.” And, in the case of Poland, none of the victors had any interest in telling the true story. The Germans spun their narrative of the September campaign as best they could in the early years of the war and produced a host of memoirs, coffee-table books, and pseudo-histories that lauded their victory, extolled the brilliance of the Blitzkrieg, and emphasized the innate inferiority of the enemy. After the war, meanwhile, when the extent of German crimes was known to the world, the invasion of Poland became a quaint overture to the murderous main act. Aside from a few postwar memoirs and the work of a small number of historians, few Germans care to remember the campaign today.

The Soviets, meanwhile, did everything they could to pretend they did not invade Poland in 1939. The postwar narrative, which showed the Soviet Union and its people as the foremost victims of the war, could not permit an acknowledgment that Stalin had facilitated Hitler in starting the conflict, or that he had then assisted his newfound ally in invading, partitioning, and destroying Poland. Consequently, the Red Army’s invasion was dressed up as a humanitarian intervention, and any mention of it as anything else was effectively suppressed, both in the Soviet Union and in postwar Communist Poland. That denial continues to our present moment. As recently as 2016, a Russian blogger was prosecuted for sharing a text about German–Soviet collaboration in the invasion of Poland. His alleged crime was the “circulation of false information.”

Although not an active suppression of the facts, Britain’s own heroic wartime narrative left little popular appetite for, or interest in, its humiliating betrayal of its Polish ally. Even though many Polish veterans of 1939 made their homes in the United Kingdom after their nation’s defeat, and after Poland fell to Communist control in 1945, their stories were scarcely heard. The memoirs and histories written by veterans residing in the United Kingdom—such as Władysław Anders, Klemens

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Rudnicki, and Józef Garliński—failed to puncture the established Western narrative of the war.

In the end, it was left to the Poles themselves to tell the story of the two invasions of 1939. In the immediate postwar years, Communist Poland was not interested in publicizing those events, except to reflexively damn the “German fascists” and the prewar regime for its supposed foolhardiness. By the 1960s, when a more nationalistic communism prevailed, a new narrative emerged. This narrative, based loosely (and not wholly inaccurately) upon the idea of the ordinary Polish soldier being betrayed by the ineptitude of his superiors and the duplicity of his capitalist allies, vehemently denied any belligerent role for the Red Army. Only after the Communist system collapsed in 1989 were those aspects of Polish history finally open to objective examination, and only then could the story of Poland’s war be told in its entirety.

This book, therefore, is an attempt to embrace some of that new Polish historiography, and so to rebalance the wonky Western narrative of the Second World War’s opening campaign. It tells a story that is still little known to English-speaking readers—a story of heroism, of suffering, and of a gallant fight against ruthless and superior enemies. And it is an attempt to wrest the story free from the dark shadow of totalitarian propaganda—from the Nazi mythology of an easy Blitzkrieg victory to the Soviet lie that the Red Army never invaded at all. As such, Polish voices—from memoirs, diaries, and archival accounts—are finally brought into the story. One can only hope that future historians will no longer render the Poles as nameless, voiceless victims, bit-part players in their own narrative.

OF COURSE, ANY WORK OF SCALE AND AMBITION REQUIRES COLLABORATORS, and though the words on the page are mine, a huge number of debts were accrued in their preparation that must be acknowledged. Many colleagues and friends were kind enough to share their knowledge, including Grzegorz Bębnik, Sławomir Dębski, Richard Hargreaves,

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Others were on hand to give help and advice as I traveled across Poland to visit archives, museums, and the sites where the events I was describing took place, such as Mokra, Wizna, the Bzura battlefields, or Mława. They include Krzysztof Mroczkowski and Jakub Link-Lenczowski at the Muzeum Lotnictwa Polskiego in Kraków, Katarzyna Tomiczek of the Ośrodek Promocji Gminy Węgierska Górka, Emil Makles of the Izba Pamięci Bitwy pod Mokrą, Kazimierz Śwircz at the Muzeum Bitwy nad Bzurą in Kutno, Marcin Sochoń and Dariusz Szymanowski of the Stowarzyszenie “Wizna 1939,” Ludwik Zalewski in Nowogród, Wojciech Śleszyński and Łukasz Radulski in Białystok, Katarzyna Myszkowska and Krzysztof Bojarczuk in Sulejów, Andrzej Jarczewski and Mikołaj Ratka at the Radiostacja Gliwice in Gliwice, Tomasz Chinciński at the Muzeum II Wojny Światowej in Gdańsk, Karol Szejko at the Muzeum Westerplatte i Wojny 1939 r. in Gdańsk, Marek Adamkowicz at the Muzeum Poczty Polskiej in Gdańsk, Jan Tymiński and Jacek Waryszak at the Muzeum Marynarki Wojennej in Gdynia, Radosław Wiecki in Tczew, Wojciech Krajewski and Janusz Wesołowski at the Muzeum Wojska Polskiego in Warsaw, Władysław Szarski at the Muzeum Obrony Wybrzeża on Hel, Marcin Owsiniński at the Muzeum Stutthof in Sztutowo, and Jacek Wilamowski and Katarzyna Skourpa-Malińska at the Muzeum Ziemi Zawkrzeńskiej in Mława.

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gifted and indefatigable research assistant Anastazja Pindor, without whom this book would scarcely have been possible. For everything else, I must thank my wife, Melissa, and my children, Oscar and Amelia, and their daily reminders of what really matters.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this book to someone whose passion for the subject inspired my interest in Polish history nearly three decades ago—my former professor, coauthor, and most esteemed colleague, Norman Davies.

Tring, 2019

– PROLOGUE –

AN UNREMARKABLE MAN

THERE IS ONLY ONE SURVIVING PICTURE OF FRANCISZEK Honiok. It was taken for a family occasion, or maybe a court visit, and it shows him in a suit and tie, his dark blond hair beginning to recede at the temples, his pale eyes betraying a determined look. At five feet two inches, he was a little shorter than average, and he had a slightly disheveled air, but other than that he was very ordinary. Perhaps that was what determined his fate.

As the forty-one-year-old bachelor was escorted away that day, it was said that he looked bewildered. Doubtless he was wondering why he had been picked up, but he did not say a word.¹ He had most likely been selected from a file in Gestapo headquarters, far away on Prinz Albrecht Strasse in Berlin, where an ethnic Pole with a history of anti-German agitation was urgently required for an undisclosed purpose. If anything, Honiok was too qualified. Born in the German province of Upper Silesia in 1898, he had fought on the Polish side during the Silesian Uprisings that had followed the First World War. After a brief stint in Poland, he then returned to Germany in 1925, whereupon he was forced to fight deportation back to Poland, a case he successfully pursued all the way to the League of Nations in Geneva. Though his firebrand days were

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perhaps over by 1939, Honiok was still well known in his home village of Hohenlieben (Łubie) as a staunch advocate of the Polish cause.

As he was taken away on the afternoon of August 30, 1939, Honiok had little idea of what his Gestapo captors had in store for him. He was driven first to the barracks at Beuthen (Bytom), where he was given food and water, and then to the Gestapo headquarters at Oppeln (Opole), where he spent an uncomfortable night locked in a file room. Throughout, his captors noted, he was “apathetic, his head constantly bowed.”² He never spoke, and no one spoke to him except for curt instructions from his Gestapo escort. Moreover, despite the German obsession with paperwork, he was not registered in any of the locations through which he passed; his guards were under orders that he was to remain anonymous.³ The following morning, August 31, Honiok was taken to the police station at Gleiwitz (Gliwice), where he was placed in solitary confinement, again with no records taken.⁴ It would be the last day of his life.

Later that afternoon, across town in the Haus Oberschlesien Hotel, Schutzstaffel (SS) *Sturmbannführer* (Major) Helmut Naujocks delivered a final briefing to his team of six SS men and policemen. Naujocks—a twenty-seven-year-old from Kiel on Germany’s Baltic coast—had been an early convert to Nazism, joining the SS in 1931 after briefly attending university and having his nose flattened by a Communist with an iron bar. Described by one contemporary as “an intellectual gangster,” he swiftly fell under the patronage of Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the German police network and one of the darkest figures in the Nazi hierarchy.⁵ It was on Heydrich’s instruction that Naujocks and his team had arrived in Gleiwitz two days earlier, posing as mining engineers. Their real task, however, was to engineer a “false flag” operation: to make it look as though Polish irregulars had attacked German territory.

Tensions between Germany and Poland—which had been strained at best for some two decades—had spiked over the preceding few months. The ostensible reason for the *froideur* was Germany’s territorial losses to Poland from the Versailles Treaty—primarily Upper Silesia, Posen, and the so-called Polish Corridor—all of which had been viewed as a

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Helmut Naujocks, the “intellectual gangster” and architect of the Gleiwitz incident.

Library of Congress; public domain



The victim: Franciszek Honiok
private collection

profound humiliation in Germany and had contributed to a gradual poisoning of German–Polish relations. Hitler’s ire, however, went deeper, stoked by his racial prejudices and his belief that Germany’s national destiny lay in expansion to the east. As he had become more reckless in his saber-rattling, eager to capitalize on what he saw as Western weakness and anxious for the war that he thought would define him and his “Third Reich,” Hitler had begun to target Poland more specifically, ramping up the rhetoric and complaining vociferously of Polish barbarism and bad faith.

By the summer of 1939, therefore, territorial concessions by the Poles, had they been offered, would no longer be enough: Hitler wanted his war. He faced two problems, however. For one thing, Poland had allies in Britain and France: both had pledged to defend it in the event of foreign aggression. For another, the vast majority of the German people, though most supported the Nazis wholeheartedly, had no stomach for another world war. Hitler thus had to dress up his belligerent intentions to make them appear defensive: he needed to show Poland as

the aggressor and Germany as the innocent victim. In this way, he reasoned, the German people might be persuaded to support the war, and Poland might even be detached from its international alliances. Hitler summed up these ideas in a speech to his senior military commanders at his Alpine residence near Berchtesgaden on August 22. "The destruction of Poland has priority," he said, adding that "the aim is to eliminate active forces, not to reach a definite line. Even if war breaks out in the West, the destruction of Poland remains the primary objective." When it came to public opinion, he assured the commanders, "I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war, no matter whether it is plausible or not. The victor will not be asked afterwards whether he told the truth."⁶

That summer, the world saw much of Hitler's propaganda offensive. Though the SS took the lead, German military intelligence, the Abwehr, also involved itself in the task of undermining Poland. In the last week of August, it engineered a spate of incidents across the country, which were often intended to look as though they were inspired by anti-German sentiment: a bomb attack was carried out on a war memorial in Cieszyn, another targeted a German book shop in Poznań, yet another damaged a railway bridge in Nowy Sącz.⁷

Its most infamous operation took place on the night of August 28, when one of its agents—an unemployed metalworker of German extraction by the name of Antoni Guzy—left a large bomb, contained in two suitcases, in the left-luggage hall of Tarnów railway station in the south of the country. When the bomb exploded shortly after 11:00 p.m., it destroyed a section of the station building and killed twenty-four people, including a two-year-old girl.⁸ Guzy was arrested at the scene, and under interrogation he provided investigators with chapter and verse on the subversive methods of the Abwehr. He explained that he had been recruited via a German trade union organization and had received cursory training in Germany before being assigned to a cell operating out of the town of Skoczów in southern Poland. After receiving his orders in a coded message broadcast by Radio Breslau (Wrocław), he had traveled from Bielsko first to Kraków, where he had collected the cases, and

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then on to Tarnów, where he had deposited them in the left-luggage hall. Guzy, who claimed not to have known that the cases contained explosives, told his interrogators that he had done what he did because he “felt German.”⁹

Guzy was little more than a pawn, but his interrogation would have made it clear to the Poles—if they were not aware already—that the Abwehr was behind the attacks. What was less clear was the precise motivation: the bombing in Tarnów had little discernible military rationale, beyond a wanton destruction of Polish infrastructure—and Guzy gave no hint of a wider goal or plan. It seemed most likely intended to provoke some sort of retaliation by the Poles against the German minority, thereby adding weight to Hitler’s propaganda narrative of ethnic persecution and perhaps providing him with grounds for a military intervention.¹⁰

While the Abwehr recklessly blundered, and Hitler railed about Polish intransigence, the agents of the SS were silently working to drive relations between Berlin and Warsaw to a breaking point. Already that summer, Heydrich had ordered that all “politically unreliable elements” were to be removed from a prohibited area along the German side of the Polish frontier.¹¹ Within that zone, isolated properties, barns, and farmsteads were identified and earmarked for gasoline-bomb attacks, for which Polish arsonists would then be made responsible.¹² Through the summer of 1939, therefore, German newspapers carried countless lurid reports on what they called “Polish Terror,” complaining of “Polish bandits,” “growing nervousness,” and the “frightful suffering of German refugees.” By the end of August, they would claim that some sixty-six Germans had been murdered.¹³

At the same time that the German media was busy slandering the Poles, a training center was established at Bernau, north of Berlin, at which over 300 SS volunteers, mostly from Upper Silesia, were prepared to conduct infiltration operations against Poland. They were trained using Polish weapons and uniforms, and taught the essentials of the Polish language. By late August, they were ready for action. On the night of August 31, the volunteers were deployed in “raids” on the German customs post at Hochlinden (Stodoły), near Rybnik, and the foresters’