

SUMMARY

The majority of works on the Polish defensive war of 1939, published in Poland in 1945–1989, presented almost exclusively various aspects of the Polish-German campaign. For decades, the full dimension of the September campaign could not be discussed; this applies both to the German offensive from the west and the unexpected, treacherous aggression from the east. The authorities of Polish People's Republic prohibited the inclusion of the latter topic – a component of the second stage of the defensive war to the east of the Narew, the Vistula and the San – into descriptions of the campaign as a whole; the same holds true for analyses of armed activity (including the cooperation of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army in combating the Polish Armed Forces), assessments of the relation of forces, as well as reflections concerning own losses and those of the enemy. All those themes were stamped with the seal of silence. The decisive factor was omnipotent censorship, both Polish and that of assorted Soviet institutions and political-administrative bodies.

The most serious obstacle for research into the origin of German-Soviet political and military cooperation and into questions associated with Soviet military preparations for aggression, the course and outcome of the war operations of the Red Army, the occupation of Polish eastern territories, war crimes and the fate of hundreds of thousands of war prisoners was created by the inaccessibility of Soviet archives. New opportunities appeared after 1990, when due to the “perestroika”, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the impact of public opinion, Russia opened heretofore closely guarded archives and made certain documents available to historians. The archival material includes sources concerning the Red Army in 1939, i. a. up to now unknown documents pertaining to Soviet aggression against Poland, studied by members of the Polish Military Archival Commission, established in 1992 by the Minister of National Defence of the Republic of Poland.

The major part of the problems discussed in *Kresy w czerwieni. Agresja Związku Radzieckiego na Polskę w 1939 roku* (A Red Tide over the Eastern Borderlands. Soviet Aggression against Poland in 1939) was presented upon the basis of Red Army operational documents from 1939, kept in the Russian State Military Archive in Moscow (Makarova Street). The material is arranged in the following order:

Introduction

I. The political-military situation in Europe on the eve of the second world war 1. Polish relations with neighbouring countries:

- a) the Soviet Union
- b) Germany
- c) Czechoslovakia
- d) Lithuania

2. Polish alliances with:

- a) France

- b) Great Britain
- c) Rumania
- 3. The Soviet-German pact of 23 August 1939.
- 4. Allied and enemy military forces at the end of August 1939 and plans of their deployment.
 - a) France
 - b) Great Britain
 - c) Rumania
 - d) Third Reich
 - e) Soviet Union
- 5. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland.
 - a) Defensive plans
 - Operational plan “East”
 - Operational plan “West”
 - b) Organisation
 - c) Armament
 - d) The mobilisation and expansion of the Polish armed forces on the eve of the German aggression
- 6. Relations of forces.

II. An outline of the campaign in Poland during the first half of September 1939

III. Soviet preparations for an invasion of the Republic of Poland

1. Political undertakings. Cooperation with Germany.
2. The mobilisation and concentration of the Red Army.
3. Directives of aggression.
4. Propaganda-political justifications of the aggression.

IV. The attack from the east

1. The political-military situation in Poland on the sixteenth day of the war.
2. The state of the preparedness of the Eastern Borderlands for defence.
3. The Red Army strikes. 4. “The Soviets are here”.
5. Reactions of Polish allies and neighbours.

V. The first impetus of the attack (17–19 September)

1. Strongholds under fire.
 - a) Along the Belorussian Front armies zone
 - b) Along the Ukrainian Front armies zone
2. Towards Vilno. The battle for Vilno.
3. The armoured battering ram – towards Grodno and Białystok.
4. North-eastern Polesie.
5. On the Słucza.
6. The Łuck-Włodzimierz-Kowel direction.
7. Towards Tarnopol and Lvov.
8. Cutting the Poles off from the frontier with Rumania and Hungary.

VI. Further attempts at resistance against the Red Army (20–27 September 1939)

1. The defence of Grodno.
2. Kodziowce – uhlans against Soviet tanks.
3. The Augustowska Forest.
4. Between Białystok and Włodawa.

5. South-western Polesie and the Lublin direction
6. From Włodzimierz to Chełm and Zamość.
7. Lwów and towards the San
8. The Pokucie tragedy.

VII. Last battles

1. The new demarcation line – a friendship frontier between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union (28 September)
2. The Białystok region and Podlasie.
3. Independent Operational Group “Polesie” – between the Włodawa and Parczew.
4. Last battles of the Frontier Defence Corps Group: Szack-Wytyczno
5. The General Anders Cavalry Group – an attempted breakthrough to Hungary.
6. The Colonel Zieliński group.
7. Subversion in the hinterland of enemy armies.
 - a) in the zone of the Belorussian Front armies
 - b) in the zone of the Ukrainian Front armies

VIII. The aftermath of Soviet aggression

1. Prisoners of war or internees?
2. War gains or spoils?
3. Plunder, rape, manslaughter and... political murders in the name of... Soviet law!
4. Elections – a political farce; population deportations – a tragedy on the verge of genocide.

Summary

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The political-military situation in Europe on the threshold of the second world war was highly unfavourable for the Polish state. Relations with two powerful neighbours: the Soviet Union and Germany, with whom Poland tried to conduct a policy of “equal distance”, remained tense despite non-aggression pacts. None of the two resigned from claims as regards Polish frontiers. This was the prime reason for the alliance directed against Poland (23 August 1939). Relations between Poland Czechoslovakia and Lithuania were also far from neighbourly.

Poland sought allies in Western Europe – France and Great Britain, with whom she signed defence alliances against the Third Reich. The alliance with Rumania was conceived as a defensive measure in face of eventual Soviet aggression.

If we compare the military potential represented on the eve of the war by Poland, France and Great Britain, on the one hand, and the Third Reich on the other hand, then German aggression in the east or west appears to have been unrealistic, and contained the threat of rapid defeat. Had that been the case, then the Soviet Union would have never launched an attack on 17 September. The actual situation, however, differed. In September 1939, Great Britain was not ready for war on land, and France felt best secured by the Maginot Line, unwilling to strike a decisive blow without her British ally. Poland was doomed to fight alone, and deprived of all assistance.

Nonetheless, as late as 16 September, and despite the fact that the military

situation of Poland was unsatisfactory, albeit not hopeless, all still depended on the decisive offensive of her allies. Already on 12 September, however, decisions made in Abbeville denoted a resignation from help, a fact about which the Western allies were not gracious enough to inform the Polish government. What did happen was a Red Army attack which comprised one of the elements of the Soviet-German pact of 23 August 1939.

Stalin was determined to strike "earlier", and the original date of Soviet aggression against Poland was to be the night of 12/12 September 1939. The Red Army, however, proved to be insufficiently strong, and Stalin, pressured by Hitler, was uncertain whether the West would not launch an anti-German offensive. Only when told about the Abbeville resolutions – the information was provided by Soviet spies in the entourage of Prime Minister Daladier – did he decide to attack despite the unsatisfactory preparedness of Red Army units.

The Soviet invasion of Poland, whose first operational target was the destruction of the Polish Armed Forces in the entire operational area (along the lines of the rivers Narew, the Vistula, San and Pita) and whose propaganda purpose was "the liberation of Belorussians and Ukrainians and the Polish working masses from the oppression of Polish masters", met with different reactions among the allies and neighbours of the Polish state. Great Britain and France certainly did not act in a manner befitting an ally. Winston Churchill and the British government appeared to be outright pleased with such a turn of events. In their opinion, the new situation created a Soviet-German frontier which sooner or earlier had to flare up, while the Soviet step protected Rumanian oil fields against their seizure by the Third Reich, an eventuality feared in the West.

Poland remained alone in the face of two aggressors. Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, regarded the military situation of the country in the wake of Soviet aggression as dire, and decided to abandon all struggle against the invaders and shift the largest possible number of Polish soldiers abroad, the ultimate destination being France where further efforts could be made to reconstruct the Polish army for a renewed struggle against Germany. His resolutions did not reach all Polish units; in some cases, commanders did not believe in their authenticity and demanded confirmation, although there were no authorities capable of meeting this request.

Despite numerical supremacy (Polish frontiers were crossed by about half a million Soviet soldiers and more than 5 000 tanks and armed vehicles), a few subdivisions of the Polish army opposed the Soviet influx, a venture doomed to fail. Vilno resisted the attack of two Soviet armies for up to twenty hours, while the town of Grodno withstood the onslaught of the Cavalry-Motor Group, the strongest in the Belorussian Front, for two whole days. Longer and shorter battles were waged in the whole Red Army operational area, from the Lithuanian border to the Rumanian-Hungarian frontier, from the rivers Niemen, Ślucza, and Zbrucz to Pisa, Narew, Wieprz and San. A legendary two week-long struggle was carried out by an improvised group of the Frontier Defence Corps led by General Wilhelm Orlik-Ruckmann and the uhlans of the 110 Reserve Regiment in Kodziowce, who repulsed Soviet tanks with gasoline- or kerosene-filled bottles. Particularly tragic events took place in the Pokucie region, where Soviet units strove at stopping the Polish soldiers from retreating to the Rumanian and Hungarian frontiers and carrying out the last order issued by Marshal Rydz-Śmigły.

Despite all obstacles, about 90 000 Polish soldiers managed to cross the frontiers and subsequently, by various means, to make their way to the West where, together with the Allies, they continued to wage the war against Germany.

To the end of September 1939, the Red Army captured the terrains of the Republic of Poland, defined on 28 September in a new friendship treaty signed by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. In October, the Wehrmacht and the Red Army occupied outposts along the new partition frontier. This was the onset of a policy of extermination pursued by both powers towards the Polish nation.