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Invasion of Poland

By Bradley Lightbody

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When Hitler invaded Poland, he was confident that Britain and France would continue their policy of appeasement and broker a peace deal. Bradley Lightbody considers his gross miscalculation and how it led Europe to stumble into war.

The gamble

At 4.45 am on 1 September 1939 the German battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* opened fire on the Polish garrison of the Westerplatte Fort, Danzig (modern-day Gdansk), in what was to become the first military engagement of World War Two. Simultaneously, 62 German divisions supported by 1,300 aircraft commenced the invasion of Poland.

The decision of Adolf Hitler to invade Poland was a gamble. The *Wehrmacht* (the German Army) was not yet at full strength and the German economy was still locked into peacetime production. As such, the invasion alarmed Hitler's generals and raised opposition to his command - and leaks of his war plans to Britain and France.

The decision ... to invade Poland was a gamble.

Hitler's generals urged caution and asked for more time to complete the defences of the 'West Wall', in order to stem any British and French counter-offensive in the west while the bulk of the *Wehrmacht* was engaged in the east. Their leader dismissed their concerns, however, and demanded instead their total loyalty.

Hitler was confident that the invasion of Poland would result in a short, victorious war for two important reasons. First, he was convinced that the deployment of the world's first armoured corps would swiftly defeat the Polish armed forces in a *blitzkrieg* offensive. Secondly, he judged the British and French prime-ministers, Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier, to be weak, indecisive leaders who would opt for a peace settlement rather than war.

Revision of Versailles

The latter judgement was a product of Hitler's success in winning a substantial revision of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles - which laid down severe restrictions for Germany after its defeat in World War One - between 1935-38. Britain and France had accepted German rearmament in 1935, the re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the *Anschluss*, or union, with Austria in March 1938, all in defiance of the Treaty.

At Munich in September 1938, Britain and France had also reluctantly endorsed the forced transfer of the 'ethnically German' Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Germany. Hitler had thus successfully intimidated the western powers by the threat of military action, and in particular through the widespread fear of air attack by the powerful *Luftwaffe*.

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He was also aided by public opinion in the west, which broadly regarded the Treaty of Versailles as flawed and held the belief that communism rather than fascism posed the greater threat to western democracies. In this context many welcomed a rearmed Germany, as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Consequently Hitler enjoyed a largely positive press in the west throughout the period 1933-8, as evidenced by the hosting of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the favourably regarded visits by the Duke of Windsor and ex-British prime-minister David Lloyd George.

Growing menace

The positive climate ended in March 1939. Hitler, emboldened by his earlier successes, ordered the German occupation of the whole of Czechoslovakia, gained the return of the province of Memel from Lithuania, and pressed Poland to permit the construction of new road and railways across its territories to improve communications between East Prussia and Germany.



The 'Luftwaffe' inflicted devastation upon Poland ©

East Prussia had been separated from the rest of Germany in 1919 when the Allies redrew the borders of Germany and Russia to re-establish the independent state of Poland. The Poles had lost their independence as a nation state in 1795, when Tsarist Russia and Prussia had divided and annexed Polish lands.

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Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia breached the written guarantee he had issued to Chamberlain in Munich in 1938, stating that he had no further territorial demands to make in Europe. Therefore, on 31 March 1939, Chamberlain issued a formal guarantee of Poland's borders and said that he expected Hitler to moderate his demands.

Hitler was not deterred, and on 3 April he ordered the *Wehrmacht* to prepare for the invasion of Poland on 1 September. Hitler was convinced that Chamberlain would not go to war to defend Poland and that France would lack the will to act alone.

Nazi-Soviet pact

Hitler's only real concern was that a sudden German invasion of Poland might alarm Stalin and trigger a war with the Soviet Union. Stalin feared a German invasion and had been seeking an anti-Nazi 'collective security' alliance with the western powers for many years, but by July 1939 Britain and France had still not agreed terms.

Stalin feared a German invasion...

Poland had also rejected an alliance with the Soviet Union, and refused permission for the Red Army to cross its territory to engage the *Wehrmacht* in a future war. Hitler saw his opportunity, and authorised his Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop to enter into secret negotiations with the Soviet Union.

The result was the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on 23 August 1939. Both Hitler and Stalin set aside their mutual antipathy for national gain and in particular the restoration of their pre-1919 borders.

Invasion

An ecstatic Hitler brought the date of the invasion forward to 26 August to take advantage of the surprise the pact had provoked in the west. However, only hours before the attack Hitler cancelled the invasion when his ally Mussolini declared that Italy was not ready to go to war, and Britain declared a formal military alliance with Poland.



Relentless bombardment left Poland in ruins ©

Once reassured of Mussolini's political support, Hitler reset the invasion for 1 September 1939. The invasion was not dependent on Italian military support and Hitler

dismissed the Anglo-Polish treaty as an empty gesture.

At 6 am on 1 September Warsaw was struck by the first of a succession of bombing raids, while two major German army groups invaded Poland from Prussia in the north and Slovakia in the south. Air supremacy was achieved on the first day, after most of Poland's airforce was caught on the ground. Panzer spearheads smashed holes in the Polish lines and permitted the slower moving German infantry to pour through into the Polish rear.

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In advance of the line of attack the *Luftwaffe* heavily bombed all road and rail junctions, and concentrations of Polish troops. Towns and villages were deliberately bombed to create a fleeing mass of terror-stricken civilians to block the roads and hamper the flow of reinforcements to the front.

Flying directly ahead of the Panzers, the Junkers Ju-87 dive-bomber (Stuka) fulfilled the role of artillery, and destroyed any strong points in the German path. The surprise German strategy of *blitzkrieg* was based upon continuous advance and the prevention of a static frontline that would permit Polish forces time to regroup.

At 8am, on 1 September, Poland requested immediate military assistance from France and Britain, but it was not until noon on 3 September that Britain declared war on Germany, followed by France's declaration at 5.00pm. The delay reflected British hopes that Hitler would respond to demands and end the invasion.

Western response



The Weermacht's 'blitzkrieg' invasion technique forced the Polish army to surrender ©

Western military commanders were rooted in the strategies of World War One and entirely unprepared for the rapid invasion of Poland. They expected the Germans to probe and bombard the Polish line with heavy artillery for several weeks before launching a full invasion.

Consequently while the Panzers advanced, French troops confined themselves to scouting and mapping the German 'West Wall', while awaiting the deployment of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and full mobilisation. There was no offensive strategy, because France expected to fight a war of defence, and had invested heavily in the static defences of the Maginot line. The RAF also dropped not bombs but leaflets, urging a peace settlement.

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By 6 September the two *Wehrmacht* army groups had linked up at Lodz in the centre of Poland and cleaved the country in two, trapping the bulk of the Polish army against the German border. Two days later, the Panzers had corralled Polish forces into five isolated pockets centred around Pomerania, Pozan, Lodz, Krakow and Carpathia.

Twelve of Poland's divisions were cavalry, armed with lance and sabre, and they were no match for tanks. Each pocket was relentlessly bombarded and bombed, and once food and ammunition had run out had little choice but to surrender.

By 8 September the leading Panzers were on the outskirts of Warsaw, having covered 140 miles in only eight days. Two days later all Polish forces were ordered to fall back and regroup in Eastern Poland for a last stand. All hope was pinned upon a major French and British offensive in the west to relieve the pressure.

However, despite assurances from Marshal Maurice Gamelin that the French Army was fully engaged in combat, all military action on the western front was ended on 13 September, when French troops were ordered to fall back behind the security of the Maginot line. Warsaw was surrounded on 15 September, and suffered punishing bombing raids without hope of relief.

On 17 September the Red Army crossed the Polish border in the east, in fulfilment of the secret agreement within the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and ended any prospect of Poland's survival. Those Poles who could, fled across the border into Romania, and many subsequently reached the west and continued the war as the Free Polish Forces. Among them were many pilots, who were welcomed into the RAF and took part in the Battle of Britain.

Warsaw bravely held out until 27 September, but after enduring 18 days of continuous bombing finally surrendered at 2.00pm that afternoon. Germany had gained a swift victory, but not the end of the war. Britain and France refused to accept Hitler's peace offer. His gamble had failed, and Poland had become the first battleground of World War Two.

Find out more

Books

The Second World War: Ambitions to Nemesis by Bradley Lightbody (Routledge, 2004)

How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938-1939 by Donald Cameron Watt (Heinemann, 1989)

The Road to War by Richard Overy with Richard Wheatcroft (MacMillan, 1989)

The Second World War by Martin Gilbert (Phoenix, 1989)

Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk by Len Deighton (Jonathan Cape, 1979)

The Second World War: The Gathering Storm by Winston Churchill (Cassell, 1950)

About the author

Bradley Lightbody is a writer, whose latest book is listed above. Until 2004 he was Head of History in Dewsbury College, West Yorkshire. He is currently Director of Training with the education consultancies Quiet Associates and College UK, delivering training courses to the Further Education college sector.