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Poland assaulted from both sides

On 1 September 1939 at 04:40 AM, the German air forces bombed the Polish town of Wieluń. Almost at the same time, the pre-dreadnought battleship the Schleswig-Holstein fired at the Polish transit depot at Westerplatte in Gdańsk. Hitler did not declare a war yet it became a fact and the Second World War began. Due to chaos around mobilisation (it was announced on 30 August, yet annulled under pressure from western countries and then announced again only the following day), there was much commotion among Polish troops, with many not getting to where they were destined, while the German air forces shelled railway hubs and large cities first. The situation was aggravated by civilians fleeing the territories under assault in all directions. The German troops attacked all along the border with Poland.

Although they significantly outnumbered the Polish troops, the Poles engaged in a heroic fight to defend their country. Legendary are defence of Westerplatte and defence of Warsaw. To much joy of the Poles, England and France joined the war with Germany on 3 September 1939. It soon transpired, however, that they did not plan any military operations to support Poland that was fighting on her own.



With western countries remaining passive, the Soviet troops entered Poland from the east on 17 September. Stalin was implementing the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (23 August 1939) on the German-Soviet division of the sphere of influence. Soldiers of the Border Protection Corps fought against the Red Army in defence of the Polish borders. Poland was forced to be at war with its two powerful neighbours simultaneously.

In the face of the overwhelming dominance of the enemy, the last Polish troops surrendered the arms on 5 October after the battle of Kock, despite the heroism of the soldiers. The Polish government sought shelter in Romania, where despite the earlier peaceful relations between the countries the Polish officials were detained. Exercising his prerogatives, President Mościcki named Władysław Raczkiewicz as his successor, who started the Polish government in exile, which existed until 1989. Its prime minister was General Władysław Sikorski and its seat initially France and then London. Supreme Commander Śmigły-Rydz ordered that the withdrawing Polish troops be evacuated to Romania and Hungary. The Germans treated some of the occupied territories as 'incorporated into the Reich.' From the combined provinces of Warsaw, Łódź, Katowice and Cracow they created an administrative unit called the General Government.

On the occupied territories, the USSR tried to pretend that power was being seized by the communist movement of grassroots origin. On the territories seized, both occupying forces pursued a policy of terror and physical exhaustion of the Poles and their culture. Hitler and Stalin sought to exterminate the Polish state together with its traditions and culture. Marching into Poland, the German and Soviet troops committed war crimes, murdering soldiers who had already surrendered the arms and defenceless civilians. The German air force shelled civil buildings, including hospitals. In the few years to come, Polish territory saw countless war crimes, with people dying en masse in executions, concentration camps and on the Soviet side acts of genocide and deportations. The NKVD collaborated with the German Gestapo in tracking and persecuting the Polish underground.

September 1939 showed that the war was a total one, conducted by Poland's neighbours in order to entirely exterminate the Poles and Polish Jews. Both occupying forces also adopted a common policy of merciless suppression of Polish conspirator activities. Around 70,000 soldiers died and almost 500,000 ended in captivity in that defensive war. Through the Romanian border, around 80,000 soldiers got outside to later fight in Allied troops across Europe. Poland for over a month engaged the main German forces on the eastern front, giving the Allied forces an opportunity to act in the west. Still, England and France failed to use that momentary edge over Germany, for the cause of Poland or even in their own interest.

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References: