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ROGER MOORHOUSE

FIRST TO FIGHT



THE POLISH WAR 1939

VINTAGE

ROGER MOORHOUSE

Roger Moorhouse is a historian specialising in modern German and Polish history. A fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a visiting professor at the College of Europe in Warsaw, he is the author of *Killing Hitler: The Third Reich and the Plots against the Führer*, *Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital, 1939–45 and The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–41*. *First to Fight* was shortlisted for The Duke of Wellington Medal for Military History 2020.

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For Norman,
who planted the seed

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Author's Note

Place Names

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 Anglicised form – such as Warsaw, Brest or Moscow – then I have naturally used it throughout.

Polish Pronunciation

Polish words look complicated, but their pronunciation is at least 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 *c*, which is pronounced 'ts'; *j*, which is soft, like the *y* in 'yes'; and *w*, which is equivalent to an English *v*.

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

ą = nasal *a*, hence *Piątek* is pronounced 'piontek'
ę = nasal *e*, hence *Łęczyca* is pronounced 'wenchytsa'

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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 Kałuszyn 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.

The stress in Polish is consistent, and always falls on the penultimate syllable. So 'Sosabowski' is pronounced so-sa-BOV-ski; 'Częstochowa', chen-sto-HO-va.

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POLAND 1939
German and Polish Troop Dispositions
and the German Plan

Polish armies

German armies

German line of attack

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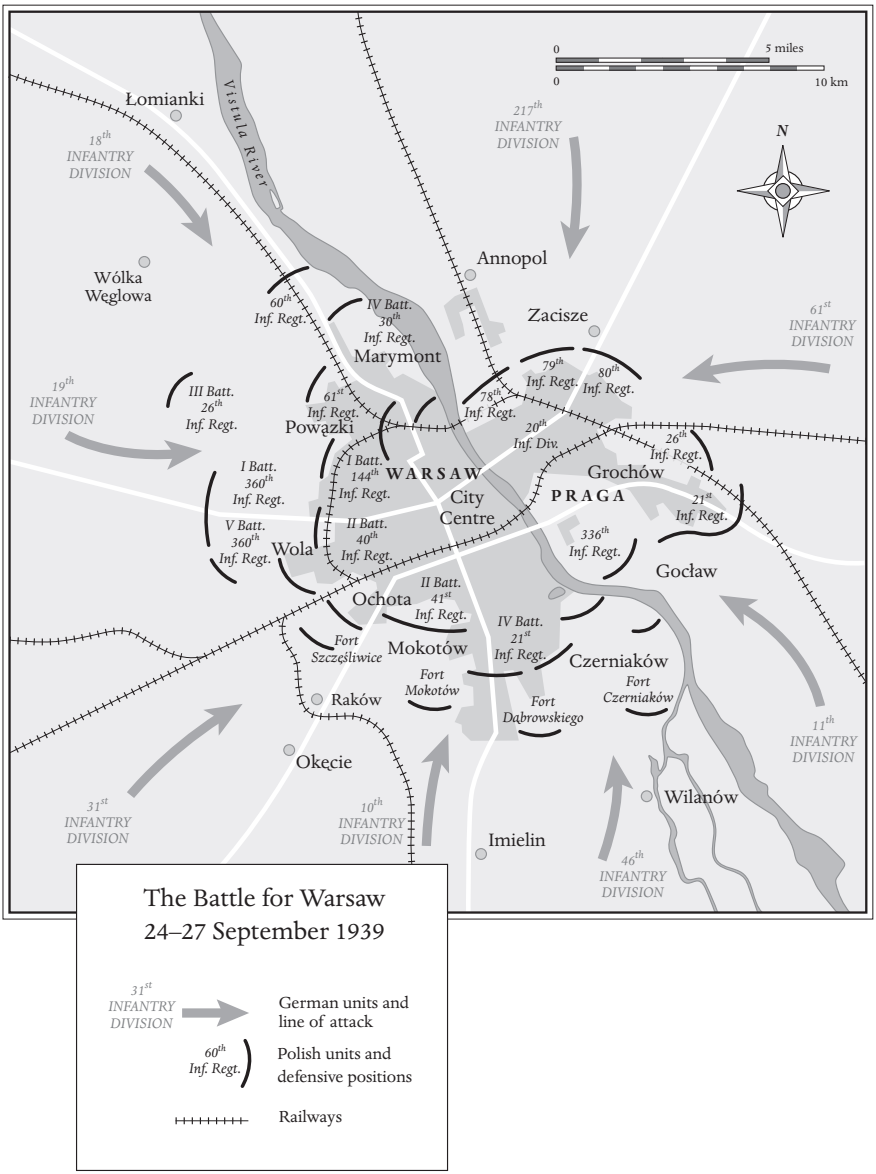
Red Army Invasion of Poland
17 September 1939

Soviet armies

Red Army line of attack

Polish KOP
(Border Defence Corps) units

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The Battle for Warsaw
24–27 September 1939

31st INFANTRY DIVISION — German units and line of attack

60th Inf. Regt. — Polish units and defensive positions

Railways

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Preface

The Second World War in Europe began at dawn on 1 September 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 vast swathes of 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 7 July 1937, when Japanese and Chinese forces engaged following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. For Americans, the war started on 7 December 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 rather 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 it on 22 June 1941. Stalin's earlier invasions of Poland, Finland and the Baltic States have been skilfully 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 gamely declared war on Hitler's Germany on 3 September 1939, after the latter's 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 westwards 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 indeed phoney – about the war that Poland fought in the autumn of 1939. As the sun rose on 1

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September, 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 17 September. 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 of its population had been killed.

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 250,000 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 pre-eminent totalitarian powers, Poland would be exposed to every horror that modern conflict could devise. Just as the Wehrmacht unleashed 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 by either side, with those deemed undesirable subjected to arrest and deportation if they were lucky, state-sanctioned murder if they were not.

The Polish campaign also had a significance well beyond Poland's frontiers: it brought Britain and France into the war. Both countries had guaranteed Poland's territorial integrity in the spring of 1939 in a vain attempt to halt German expansion. Consequently, it was the Western Allies' defence of that country – 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. However, it is not. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that 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

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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 last 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 by some of Britain's most widely read historians reveals the scale of the problem. On average, out of some 700 pages of text, they devote just sixteen to the defence 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 or scarcely seeing beyond the agonies perceived on the cricket pitches of south-east England, 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 that participated in the invasion, and the often turgid regimental histories of the German army that tend to make non-military historians' eyes bleed. The results are predictably myopic: historians repeat Nazi propaganda tropes almost verbatim, ignore the Soviet invasion entirely and shamefully write the Poles out of their own history. Little wonder, then, that most readers' knowledge of the September campaign barely extends beyond the hoary old myth of 'cavalry against tanks'.

Yet the real problem is more profound. History, as we know, is written primarily by the winner. 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 this example, none of the victors – short or long term – had any interest in telling the true story of the defence of Poland. 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, which lauded their victory, extolled the

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brilliance of the *Blitzkrieg* and emphasised 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 was seemingly relegated to an insignificant side-show: a quaint prelude to the murderous main act. Aside from a few post-war 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 that they did not invade Poland in 1939. The post-war narrative, which showed the Soviet Union and its people as the foremost victims of the war, could not permit an honest acknowledgement of the fact that Stalin had facilitated Hitler in starting the conflict, and then assisted his new-found 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 dissenting from that view was effectively suppressed, both in the Soviet Union and in post-war communist Poland. That denial continues to our own day. 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'.

One might have hoped that the British would, at least, keep the flame of truth alive. Sadly, however, that was not to be the case. Here one cannot speak of an active suppression of the facts, but Britain's own heroic wartime narrative left little popular appetite for, or interest in, that country's humiliating betrayal of its Polish ally. Even though a large number of Polish veterans of 1939 made their homes in the UK 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 resident in the UK – such as Władysław Anders, Klemens Rudnicki and Józef Garliński – signally failed to penetrate the established Western narrative of the war. It is perhaps telling that the flagship TV documentary series *The World at War*, first broadcast in 1973, which saw a host of significant characters from the conflict – from Albert Speer to Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris – interviewed on screen, featured no Poles among its contributors. It may be, of course, that this omission was simply down to the laziness of the producers, or some imagined language barrier. The more cynical mind might suggest that it suited the British and French mythology of the war to present the Poles as marginal participants who were somehow beyond help.

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In the end, it was left to the Poles themselves to tell the story of the two invasions of 1939. In the immediate post-war years, communist Poland was not interested in publicising those events, except to reflexively damn the 'German fascists' and damn the pre-war regime for its supposed foolhardiness. By the 1960s, when a more nationalistic brand of communism prevailed, a new narrative of sorts emerged, based loosely (and not wholly inaccurately) upon the idea of the ordinary Polish soldier betrayed by the ineptitude of his superiors and the duplicity of his capitalist allies, but vehemently denying any belligerent role for the Red Army. Only after the communist system collapsed in 1989 were all of those aspects of Polish history that had previously been 'off limits' finally open to objective examination. 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 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, suffering and 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 had never invaded at all. In doing so, the book finally brings Polish voices – memoirs, diaries and archival accounts – into the story. One can only hope that the Poles will no longer be rendered by future historians 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 incurred in their preparation and must be acknowledged. Many colleagues and friends were kind enough to share their knowledge, including Grzegorz Bębnik, Sławomir Dębski, Richard Hargreaves, Tomasz Kuba Kozłowski, Wojciech Łukaszun, Dmitriy Panto, Bill Russ, Ian Sayer, Rob Schäfer, Ben H. Shepherd, Andrzej Suchcitz, Jacek Tebinka and Anna Zygalska-Cannon.

Others were on hand to give help and advice as I travelled across Poland to visit archives, museums and the sites where the events I was

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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, co-author and most esteemed colleague, Norman Davies.

Tring, 2019

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PROLOGUE

An Unremarkable Man

There is only one surviving picture of Franciszek Honiok. It was taken for a family occasion, perhaps, or a court visit and 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 158 cm (5 feet 2 inches), he was a little shorter than average, and possessed of a slightly dishevelled air, but other than that he was very ordinary, almost entirely unremarkable. Perhaps that was what determined his fate.

As the 41-year-old bachelor was escorted away that day, it was said that he looked bewildered, doubtless wondering about the reason he had been picked up, but 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 rather too well 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 spell living in Poland, he then returned to Germany in 1925, whereupon he was forced to fight deportation back to Poland: a case which he successfully pursued all the way to the League of Nations in Geneva. Though his firebrand days were 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 30 August 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

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bowed'.[2] He never spoke, and no one spoke to him except for a few words of instruction 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, 31 August, 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, SS-*Sturmbannführer* (Major) Helmut Naujocks delivered a final briefing to his team of six SS and policemen. Naujocks – a 27-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 broken by a Communist with an iron bar. Described by one contemporary as 'an intellectual gangster',[5] 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. 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 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 sabre-rattling, eager to capitalise 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 – even had they been offered – would no longer be enough:

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Hitler wanted his war. He faced two problems, however. For one thing, Poland had allies in Britain and France, both of whom had pledged to stand by that nation in the event of foreign aggression. For another, the vast majority of the German people, though they supported the Nazis wholeheartedly, had no stomach for another world war. Hitler, then, 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 his attitude in a speech to his senior military commanders at his Alpine residence near Berchtesgaden on 22 August. '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 28 August, 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 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 organisation and had received cursory training in Germany before

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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 travelled from Bielsko first to Kraków, where he had collected the cases, and 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 of it 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 that his masters 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 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 arson attacks, which could then be blamed on the Poles.[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 as the German media was busy slandering the Poles, a training centre was established at Bernau, north of Berlin, at which over 300 SS volunteers, mostly from Upper Silesia, were prepared for 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 and on the night

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of the 31st were deployed in 'raids' on the German customs post at Hochlinden (Stodoły), near Rybnik, and the foresters' lodge near Pitschen (Byczyna).[14] By smashing windows, firing into the air and singing and swearing in broken Polish, they were to simulate border incursions by Polish forces.[15] Were it not for the bodies of six concentration camp inmates, who were dressed in Polish uniforms and then shot and left at Hochlinden to add bloody authenticity to the scene, it would all have been rather comical.

Given the orgy of murderous pretence that the Germans engineered on the eve of the war, it is perhaps understandable that generations of historians have persistently got the story of the Gleiwitz Incident wrong; conflating it with other actions – such as Hochlinden – and speaking erroneously of assailants in Polish uniforms and of multiple Polish victims. Such misconceptions, persistent though they are, are cured by referring to the original sources, which clearly show that the assailants at Gleiwitz were not in uniform, and that there was only one victim.

Beyond that correction, the action held another special significance. By accident or design, it was only there that the attackers – posing, of course, as Polish insurgents – were required to speak, to give voice to their 'mission' and broadcast their intentions to the wider world. To this end, Naujocks believed that he had developed the perfect plan. From his earlier reconnaissance, he had identified the Gleiwitz radio transmitting station, with its 111-metre wooden tower, as an ideal target. He and his men could easily take control of the site, lock up the station staff, fire a few shots into the ceiling and broadcast an incendiary message in Polish over the airwaves before fleeing into the darkness. He had concluded that 8.00 p.m. would be the best time for the assault, reckoning that his men would be aided by the cover of dusk. It would also be a time when most people would be at home listening to their radios.[16]

Initially, Naujocks' plan for Gleiwitz was to go ahead without bloodshed. But, his superiors decided that the attack required the addition of a clinching piece of evidence. Naujocks was informed by the head of the Gestapo himself, Heinrich Müller, that a Pole would be supplied whose bloodied corpse was to be left at the radio station as irrefutable 'proof' of Polish responsibility for the attack.[17] For this reason, it was not enough to use one of the concentration camp

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inmates killed at Hochlinden; it had to be someone with a proven history of anti-German agitation. This, then, was the fate that the SS had in store for Franciszek Honiok.

So, while Honiok spent his final hours in Gleiwitz police station, Naujocks waited in his hotel room to receive the code words that would launch his mission. At 4 p.m., the phone rang and, on answering, Naujocks heard Heydrich's nasal, high-pitched voice demanding that he call back immediately. On doing so, he heard Heydrich give the code: '*Grossmutter gestorben*' (Grandmother has died).[18] With that, he called his men together for a final briefing, reiterating their objectives and respective tasks. Later, he and his men changed into their scruffy, civilian clothes and climbed into two cars for the short journey north-east to the transmitter station. Arriving precisely at 8 p.m., as planned, and with dusk rapidly falling, they rushed into the building. Pushing past the station manager, who rose to meet them, Naujocks' men overpowered the staff before taking them to the basement, where they were ordered to face the wall as their hands were tied behind their backs. Naujocks and his radio technician, meanwhile, were trying to work out how to make their incendiary broadcast.

One of the problems that Naujocks had needed to solve in his planning was ensuring that the proclamation would be heard. He had considered targeting the main radio station in Gleiwitz – a much larger facility closer to the city centre – but had decided against it, not only because of the logistical challenge, but also because of the likelihood that its broadcasts would be cut off by the transmitter station. Consequently, he decided to stage his attack on the transmitter station itself, where there was only a 'storm microphone' – used to interrupt local programmes to warn of extreme weather – but also a much-reduced possibility that the broadcast would be monitored and interrupted.[19]

Having dealt with the station staff, Naujocks now had to locate the storm microphone and work out how to patch it into the main broadcast. Finding the microphone in a cupboard, but unable to connect it, he hauled the staff from the basement at gunpoint, one by one, until one of them obliged and told him what to do.[20] With that, the group's Polish speaker, Karl Hornack, pulled a crumpled sheet of

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paper from his pocket and stepped forward. As a pistol was fired into the air to provide an appropriately martial atmosphere, he read:

> *UWAGA! TU GLIWICE! RADIOSTACJA ZNAJDUJE SIĘ W POLSKICH RĘKACH!*[21] (Attention! Here is Gleiwitz! The radio station is in Polish hands!)

What followed was supposed to be a call to arms from a fictional 'Polish Freedom Committee', demanding that the Polish population in Germany rise up to resist the authorities and conduct sabotage operations, and promising that the Polish army would soon march in as a liberator.[22] However, for reasons that have never been satisfactorily explained, only the first nine words were broadcast, and those were only audible in the district of Gleiwitz itself; the remainder was lost in a cacophony of static. Heydrich, listening in Berlin, heard nothing at all.[23]

While Naujocks had been busying himself with his broadcast, Franciszek Honiok was delivered to the building. Shortly before 8 p.m., he had been visited in his cell in Gleiwitz police station by an SS man in a white coat, purporting to be a doctor, who had given him an injection.[24] Unconscious, he was then driven the short distance to the transmitter station, where two of Naujocks' men carried him into the building, laying him down close to the rear entrance. It is not clear who shot Honiok, or precisely when he was killed, but as Naujocks left the radio station, he stopped briefly to examine the dead man, slumped close to the door, his face smeared with his own blood. He would maintain, to his death in 1966, that neither he nor his men had shot Franciszek Honiok. He knew nothing about the man, Naujocks told prosecutors, not even his name: 'I was not responsible for him,' he said.[25]

So, with barely a thought, Franciszek Honiok was murdered to provide the gloss on Heydrich's nefarious propaganda coup. He was expendable, disposable, anonymous; collateral damage in Nazi Germany's headlong drive to war. He would become a footnote to history, his murder demonstrating the sneering contemptuous brutality of the Nazi regime, and giving a grim foretaste of the fate that would befall Poland. His was a single death that prefaced at least fifty million others; an individual tragedy presaging a collective slaughter.

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It didn't matter that the ruse to which Honiok's body had given spurious credence failed: the German media were already primed and ready to run the story regardless. Within hours the radios were blaring and the newspaper presses were rolling, bearing banner headlines about the Polish 'attack' on Gleiwitz and the inevitability of a German response.[26] By the time most Germans heard or read those words, the following morning, Hitler's tanks were already advancing into Poland. The Second World War had begun.

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'Westerplatte Fights On'

At 4.43 a.m., shortly after dawn, on 1 September 1939, the German battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* slipped her moorings in the New Port of Danzig (Gdańsk), and was nudged and cajoled the short distance to where the Vistula made a southward turn, the Bend of the Five Whistles. There, positioned almost perpendicularly across the channel, she trained her guns on the Polish military transit depot on the Westerplatte, some 300 metres away, and – on the command of her captain, Gustav Kleikamp – opened fire.

For those watching events that morning, the *Schleswig-Holstein* must have seemed a peculiar candidate to fire the opening salvoes of the Second World War. A survivor of the *Deutschland* class of battleships, she had been launched in 1906, before the advent of the Dreadnoughts had revolutionised naval warfare. Obsolete even before the start of the First World War, she had participated in the Battle of Jutland in 1916 and had been decommissioned the following year, destined for use as a floating barracks. She had even been earmarked as a 'target ship' for the modern vessels of Hitler's navy to practise their gunnery. With her vertical ram-bow, the *Schleswig-Holstein* was a naval relic, a throwback to an earlier age, which had been pressed back into service as a training ship for German naval cadets. Moored in Danzig harbour on a 'friendship visit' to the city to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg – that salient German victory in the opening months of the First World War – she would scarcely have been seen as a threat.

Yet, though the manner of the attack may have been a surprise, the location certainly was not. Danzig had long been the focus of German–Polish tensions. Though ethnically predominantly German, it had been detached from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles and established as

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a free state under the League of Nations; while transport and trade concessions granted to the newly reconstituted Poland meant that it served in effect as Poland's port. This naturally rankled, both in Germany and among the majority German population of the city. Strikes among dock workers in 1920 then led to Poland being granted the peninsula of the Westerplatte – effectively the eastern bank of the Vistula estuary – to serve as a military depot for the secure unloading of munitions and military hardware. As one of the few key Polish sites in and around Danzig, the Westerplatte would inevitably find itself in the firing line in the event of heightened tensions.

And tensions were most certainly heightened in the summer of 1939. After his success in dismantling Czechoslovakia, Hitler had trained his sights on Poland, and the running sore of Danzig was an obvious target both for his rhetoric and for the subversive actions of his acolytes. With passions duly enflamed, it was perhaps unsurprising that large numbers of Danzigers turned out to welcome the *Schleswig-Holstein* upon its arrival in the port, on the morning of 25 August. They would not have suspected that the aged vessel, sailing into dock with flags flying and her crew immaculately turned out on her upper decks, was concealing a company of 225 marines.[1] Her 'friendship visit' was, in truth, a mission of war.

So it was that the *Schleswig-Holstein*'s main 28cm guns were brought to bear on the Westerplatte that morning. Actually, there was not much for them to aim for. A barracks, mess and storerooms had been built in the early 1930s, along with a ring of five guardhouses to provide a modicum of security. In accordance with the original treaty by which it had been established, the Westerplatte depot was permitted a garrison of some eighty-eight officers and men. However, as German–Polish relations had deteriorated from 1938, the site had been surreptitiously reinforced, its garrison raised to 210 through the simple method of smuggling in soldiers, and its defences augmented by the addition of anti-tank ramparts, barbed-wire entanglements, an alarm system and seven reinforced outposts, complete with slit trenches and earthworks. In total, the Polish troops on the Westerplatte possessed 160 rifles, 42 machine guns, 1,000 grenades, 4 mortars and 2 anti-tank guns.[2] As one veteran recalled of that summer, every Westerplatte soldier slept with his boots on: 'holding his gun, like a lover beneath the blanket, locked and loaded'.[3]

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So, at 4.48 a.m., as the Polish garrison slept, the *Schleswig-Holstein*'s guns began their broadside. Over the following seven minutes, they boomed and thundered, raining down over 5 tonnes of shells on the Polish positions, aiming to breach the depot's eastern perimeter wall and soften up the defenders. In addition to the eight salvoes from the main guns, fifty-nine shells were fired from the *Schleswig-Holstein*'s medium battery, as well as 600 rounds from its 20mm flak guns.[4] As one Polish survivor recalled with masterful understatement: 'They dropped a lot of iron on Westerplatte.'[5] The results were certainly impressive; trees were splintered to matchwood, and many of the barracks and guardhouses were damaged. Despite the point-blank range, however, the initial shelling was not as successful as one might have expected, with some of the shells failing to explode, others detonating in the trees, and a few sailing over the peninsula to drop harmlessly in the Bay of Danzig beyond.[6] Nonetheless, as a veil of smoke and dust enveloped the peninsula, the first military death of the war was registered: 25-year old Rifleman Stefan Jezierski was killed instantly when a 20mm shell came through the observation window of his position in Guardhouse 3.[7]

Given their dominance in firepower, it is perhaps understandable that the German attackers were confident of taking the depot 'in ten minutes'.[8] That optimism was not shared by all of those present, however. The *Schleswig-Holstein*'s captain, Gustav Kleikamp – a veteran of the Battle of Jutland and a former U-boat officer – had much to say in the ship's log about the lack of adequate preparation and reconnaissance, writing a few days earlier that 'informants had been given more credibility than the military planners, and no one had been told – even in August 1939 – what was intended for the Westerplatte'.[9] He was especially concerned about the lack of adequate maps, given that a single example – 'old, containing no details of buildings and munition stores' – had been handed to the marine brigade's commanders only the day before the attack.[10] The marines would be advancing blind.

Such concerns were dramatically realised at 4.55 a.m., when the *Schleswig-Holstein*'s guns fell silent, and the first landward assault began. Moving westward along the peninsula, the marines came under fire from all sides as soon as they passed what was left of the 2-metre wall that marked the boundary of the Westerplatte depot. If they

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were expecting a simple mopping-up operation, convinced that no one could have survived the bombardment, they were to be sorely disappointed. As they advanced, they soon found themselves under withering fire from the Polish positions, some of which were not visible to them and were not marked on their out-of-date maps.[11] As their commander would later confess, at no time during that first assault did they even see the enemy.[12]

The Poles, however, could see their attackers all too clearly. As one defender, stationed in a forward outpost, recalled:

> I saw how the Germans advanced. They had white canvas rucksacks, two long-handle hand grenades each and egg grenades in a bag, also of white canvas. They made very good targets, with their dark uniforms and white canvas bags, very easy to see from a distance. But we didn't have to strain our eyes, because we let them come as close as 30–40 metres before we opened fire … Few of them came out alive.[13]

Moving ahead in plain sight and unaware of their surroundings, the German marines were sitting ducks for the Polish defenders. Watching on from the *Schleswig-Holstein*, Captain Kleikamp noted with concern that despite the 'continuing heavy fighting … the company seems to make only very slow progress'.[14]

After an hour of fighting, the advance by the first wave of three marine platoons had ground to a halt, just inside the eastern perimeter of the Westerplatte depot. Taking heavy losses, with thirteen dead and fifty-eight wounded, the marines were forced to withdraw, the survivors convinced that Polish soldiers were even hiding in what remained of the treetops.[15] Kleikamp noted glumly: 'The Poles on the Westerplatte will not simply be overrun by a surprise attack.'[16]

With that failure, the *Schleswig-Holstein* launched a second, more intensive bombardment of the Polish positions, this time lasting for almost an hour and using a further 46 tonnes of munitions.[17] Again, the effect on the Westerplatte was devastating. As Lieutenant Leon Pająk recalled:

> The momentary calm is broken by the roar of cannons and explosions … The soldiers cling to the walls of the trench. A hail of shrapnel, splinters of tree branches and entire treetops rain down from the sky.

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> Fountains of sand, a whirling cloud of smoke, the stench of sulphur and hot iron …

Soon after, Pająk was hit in the stomach and groin, and lost consciousness.[18]

When the bombardment was finished, shortly before 9 a.m., another ground assault was launched by the marine company, now reinforced by sixty men of the SS-Heimwehr Danzig, a Nazi militia raised from local volunteers. Initially the attack fared rather better than before, with forward units briefly reaching the ring of Polish guardhouses before being repelled. In the chaos that followed, however, the marines' commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Wilhelm Henningsen, was mortally wounded, and the unit was again forced to withdraw.[19] At 1 p.m. Henningsen's deputy reported to the *Schleswig-Holstein* that 'taking the Westerplatte with the storm company was impossible'.[20]

Later that day, the marines' acting commander reported to his superiors that success would only be achieved with the 'complete destruction' of the site, and requested that his unit – half of which had been 'wiped out' – be removed from the front line.[21] The frustration he showed went all the way to the top. In his diary, the German army's chief of staff, General Franz Halder, recorded the difficulty that the Polish defence of the Westerplatte was causing. 'No heavy artillery,' he wrote, '*Schleswig* maintains it cannot destroy [the bunkers], *Stuka* liaison maintains that they cannot hit them.' With only a little exaggeration, he summed up the problem: 'at least 20 modern concrete bunkers, with underground connection. Above ground, wire obstacles within thickly wooded area.'[22]

Among the defenders, meanwhile, morale was good and losses were comparatively light, with only a few men wounded and four killed that day; as well as Stefan Jezierski, Sergeant Wojciech Najsarek was killed during the marines' assault on the perimeter, and Corporal Andrzej Kowalczyk and Rifleman Bronisław Uss died of their wounds. 'After the baptism of fire', the garrison's commander, Major Henryk Sucharski, recalled, 'the crew maintains excellent combat spirit.'[23] Clearly, the Westerplatte was not the easy target that the Germans had imagined.

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While the fighting raged on the Westerplatte that morning, another German assault was under way in the city itself, at the so-called Polish Post Office on Heveliusplatz. Poland had been granted an extraterritorial post office in Danzig under the Treaty of Versailles, to provide for the secure handling of postal traffic through the city. And as a prominent symbol of the Polish state, the post office inevitably became a target when the crisis peaked in the summer of 1939. In response, a combat engineer, Reserve Lieutenant Konrad Guderski, had been sent to bolster the building's defences, while army reservists and militiamen had been transferred in to serve as the postal staff. By the morning of 1 September, the building contained fifty-eight people – including the manager's wife and adopted daughter, eleven-year-old Erwina – along with rifles, machine guns and three crates of hand grenades. In the event of an attack, the defenders were ordered to hold out for six hours, by which time they would be relieved by the Polish army.[24]

As at the Westerplatte, the German attackers at the post office – units of the SS-Heimwehr Danzig and the Danzig police – grievously underestimated their opponents. When the muffled boom of the *Schleswig-Holstein*'s guns sounded in the distance at 4.48 a.m., they began their assault, with a large-scale raid on the front of the building serving as a feint for an attempted breach of the rear. Both attacks failed, stymied by the preparedness and fierce resistance of the Polish defenders. Later that morning, two armoured cars were brought up, along with three artillery pieces, and the building was attacked again. Little was achieved, however. Polish machine-gun positions replied to each German assault with such venom that one attacker described the building as a 'fire-spewing mountain'.[25] Among the defenders, meanwhile, only Guderski had been killed, apparently by the blast of his own grenade while halting an attempted German incursion.[26] 'Even shelling with a heavy howitzer of the Wehrmacht could not bring the defenders to surrender,' one SS veteran of the action recalled, adding that 'the Poles defended their Post Office with extraordinary bravery'.[27] Surprised by such determined resistance, the German commander, Police General Willi Bethke, ordered the evacuation of the surrounding buildings, fearful of collateral damage and doubtless wary of eye-witnesses to his actions. The Poles were then addressed by loudspeaker and informed that they had two hours to surrender. After that, they were told, the building would be destroyed.[28]

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