

# Second World War: The Storm of War

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On the evening of Thursday, August 31st, 1939, an unnamed inmate of a German concentration camp was taken by members of the Gestapo to a radio transmitting station outside the frontier town of Gleiwitz. He was then dressed up in a Polish army uniform and shot. A propaganda story was subsequently concocted alleging that the Poles had attacked Germany, thus enabling Hitler to invade Poland 'in self-defence', without needing to declare war first. 'Operation Himmler', as this farcically transparent pantomime was codenamed, thus encompassed the very first death of the Second World War.

Although months of sabre-rattling against Poland meant that this could not be a surprise attack, Hitler hoped, with good reason, that the Wehrmacht's new Blitzkrieg (lightning war) tactics, hitherto the untested preserve of certain German and British theoretical tacticians, would prove successful. Blitzkrieg relied on fast-moving armoured columns punching deep holes in the enemy's front, closely supported by dive-bombers and truck-borne infantry.

Hitler's dislike of static, attritional warfare was a response to his years in the 16th Bavarian Infantry Regiment during the First World War. His job as a *Meldegänger* (runner) involved waiting for a gap in artillery salvos and then springing forward in a semi-crouched stance, sprinting from trench to shell-hole taking messages. He was brave and conscientious, probably never killed anyone and always refused promotions that would take him away from his comrades because, as his regimental adjutant Fritz Wiedemann later stated: 'for Gefreiter (Corporal) Hitler, the Regiment was home'. He even won two Iron Crosses, Second Class and First Class.

Having survived four years of stalemate and attrition, by the end of the war, at the age of 29, Hitler had learned that tactical surprise was of inestimable advantage in warfare. In *Mein Kampf* (1925) he wrote: '... a man of 30 will have much to learn in the course of his life, but this will only be a supplement'. Throughout his political career as a revolutionary, Hitler constantly sought to employ surprise, usually with great success. The Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, his attempt to overthrow the Weimar government of Ebert and put right-wing nationalists in its place, had even surprised its titular leader, General Ludendorff. Likewise, Ernst Röhm, leader of the Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (stormtroopers), had no inkling of the Night of the Long Knives that brought his abrupt demise.

Yet the Poles were also expecting a sudden attack because exactly a week before it actually took place, their country had been 'invaded' by a tiny detachment of Germans. This is a little-known incident, but one that put Polish forces on red alert. Part of Germany's plan to invade Poland, *Fall Weiss* (Plan White), involved small groups of Germans dressed in *Räuberzivil* (robbers' civvies) crossing the border the night before and seizing key strategic points before dawn on the day of the invasion. The secret *Abwehr* (Intelligence) battalion detailed to undertake these operations was given the euphemistic title of 'Construction Training Company 800 for Special Duties'. A 24-man group under the command of Lieutenant Dr Hans-Albrecht Herzner was instructed to prepare the way for the assault of the 7th Infantry Division by infiltrating the border. They were to capture a railway station at Mosty in the Jablunka Pass in the Carpathian Mountains to prevent the destruction of the single-track railway tunnel which was the shortest connection between Warsaw and Vienna.

Crossing the border into the forests at 12.30am on Saturday, August 26th, Herzner's group got lost and was split up in the dark, but he and 13 men managed to capture the railway station at Mosty later that afternoon. They cut the telephone and telegraph lines and then Polish tunnel guards attacked Herzner's unit, wounding one of his men. Out of contact with the Abwehr, Herzner did not know that the previous evening, after the British and French hinted at further appeasement of Hitler's demands, the Führer had postponed Plan White until the following week; every other commando unit had been informed of this except his. It was not until 9.35am the following day that the Abwehr finally managed to get through to Herzner, who by then had lost another man and had killed a Pole in the firefight, and order him to release his prisoners and return to base immediately.

After a further series of adventures, Herzner's group recrossed the border at 1.30pm, with the German government explaining that the whole affair had been a mistake due to the lack of a defined border line in the forest. As the operation had not been an official military one, Herzner very 'Teutonically' put in a claim for overnight expenses of 55 reichmarks and 86 pfennigs. Equally 'Teutonically', the authorities did not initially want to award him the Iron Cross (Second Class) for exploits that technically took place in peacetime, but eventually they did. (It did him little good; after breaking his back in a motor accident in 1942 he drowned during his swimming therapy.)

The Poles could hardly have had a clearer indication that Germany was on the verge of invading their country, but they could have little intimation of Blitzkrieg tactics. They knew where and roughly when the attack would come, but crucially not how. The Poles therefore suicidally chose to place the bulk of their troops close to the German border. The Munich crisis the previous autumn and Hitler's seizure of the rump of Czechoslovakia that spring meant that Poland's border with the Reich had extended from 1,250 to a full 1,750 miles, much greater than the Polish army could adequately defend. Its commander-in-chief, Marshal Edward Smigly-Rydz, therefore had to decide whether to keep the majority of his forces back behind the natural defensive line formed by the Vistula, San and Narev rivers, or try to protect Poland's industrial heartlands and best agricultural land in the west of the country.

Smigly-Rydz decided to commit his troops to defending every inch of Polish soil, which left Poland perilously exposed. He attempted to deploy across the whole front from Lithuania to the Carpathians and even kept a special assault group for invading East Prussia, keeping one third of his force in Poznia and the Polish Corridor. As so often in the history of poor, martyred Poland, the positioning of military units was as brave as it was foolhardy, but otherwise Smigly-Rydz would have had simply to abandon cities as important as Krakow, Poznan, Bydgoszcz and Lodz, all of which lay to the west of the three rivers. Nonetheless, it is hard not to agree with Major-General Frederick von Mellenthin, then the intelligence officer of the German III Corps, that Polish 'plans were lacking a sense of reality'.

At 5.30pm on Thursday, August 31st, Hitler ordered hostilities to start the next morning and this time there would be no postponement. So, at 4.45am on September 1st, German forces activated Plan White, which had been formulated that June by the German Army High Command, the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH). On either side of a relatively weak and stationary centre, two powerful wings of the Wehrmacht would envelop Poland, crush its armed forces and capture Warsaw. Army Group North, under Colonel-General Fedor von Bock, would smash through the Polish Corridor, take Danzig (modern-day Gdansk), unite with the German 3rd Army in East Prussia and move swiftly to attack the Polish capital from the north. Meanwhile, an even stronger Army Group South, under Colonel-General Gerd von Rundstedt, would punch between the larger Polish forces facing it, push east all the way to Lvov, but also assault Warsaw from the west and north. (At the Jablunka Pass, the Poles did at least destroy the tunnel in September 1939; it was not reopened until 1948.)

The Polish Corridor, which had cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany since the Versailles Treaty of 1919, had long been presented as a *casus belli* by the Nazis, as was the reabsorption into the Reich of the ethnically German Baltic port of Danzig, but as Hitler had told a conference of generals in May 1939:

*Danzig is not the real issue; the real point is for us to open up our Lebensraum [living space] to the east and ensure our supplies of foodstuffs.*

This was to be an existential conflict, fulfilling the prophecies Hitler had made 14 years before in *Mein Kampf*. The German master race would subjugate the Slavs – *Untermensch* (subhumans) according to Nazi precepts of racial hierarchy – and use their territory to nurture a new Aryan civilisation. This was to be the world's first wholly politically ideological war.

The strategy of having a weak centre and two powerful flanks was a brilliant one and was believed to have derived from Field Marshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen's celebrated pre-Great War study of Hannibal's tactics at the Battle of

Cannae in 216 bc. Whatever the provenance, it worked superbly, slipping German armies neatly between Polish ones and converging on Warsaw from all angles almost simultaneously. Yet what made it unbeatable was not German preponderance in men and arms, but the new doctrine of Blitzkrieg. Poland was a fine testing ground for Blitzkrieg tactics: although it had lakes, forests and bad roads, it was nonetheless flat, with wide fronts and firm, late summer ground ideal for tanks. It provided almost laboratory conditions for experimentation.

Because the British and French governments had given a guarantee to Poland on April 1st, 1939, with the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain formally promising her 'all support in the power' of the Allies should she be attacked, Hitler was forced to leave a large proportion of his 100-division army in the west, guarding the still-incomplete Siegfried Line, or 'West Wall'. The fear of a war on two fronts led the Führer to detail no fewer than 40 divisions to protect his back. Crucially, however, three quarters of these were only second-rate units and they were left with only three days' ammunition. His best troops, along with all of his armoured and mobile divisions and almost all his aircraft, were devoted to the attack on Poland.

Plan White was drawn up by the OKH planners, with Hitler merely putting his imprimatur on the final document fully approving the Blitzkrieg tactics it encompassed. At that stage of the war there was a good deal of genuine mutual respect between Hitler and his generals, aided by the fact that he had so far not interfered too closely in their troop dispositions and planning. In most generals' opinion Hitler was to be applauded and admired for having restored German national pride, for vastly expanding the armed forces and sabre-rattling his way into the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland and the rump of Czechoslovakia, all without war. It was true that several officers were suspicious of him in the early days and some might even have tried to overthrow him if he had been rebuffed by the western powers during the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in March 1936, but by September 1939 he seemed unstoppable.

Undoubtedly Hitler's two Iron Crosses gave him some standing with his generals, but his own self-confidence in military affairs was singular. This may in part have come from the infantryman's sense of superiority: it was the infantry who bore the brunt of the fighting in the Great War. Both the Chief of Staff of the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), Wilhelm Keitel, and his lieutenant, the Chief of the Wehrmacht operations staff, Alfred Jodl, had been artillerymen and staff officers in the conflict: their battle had been an indirect one, although Keitel had been wounded. Walther von Reichenau, Commander-in-Chief of the 10th Army for the invasion of Poland, Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch and Hans von Kluge, who commanded the 4th Army, were also artillerymen, and General Paul von Kleist and Erich Manstein, another key army commander, had been in the cavalry (although Manstein too had been wounded). Some generals, such as Heinz Guderian, had been in the Signals and others such as Maximilian von Weichs had spent most of the war on the General Staff.

For all that the former lieutenant-colonel Winston Churchill was to mock 'Corporal' Hitler for his lowly rank in the Great War trenches, the Führer seems to have been under no inferiority complex when dealing directly with soldiers who had outranked him in the last conflict. As a battalion runner relaying orders and information, sometimes verbally, he would have learnt a great deal about tactics. Had Hitler been a German citizen it is possible that he would have been commissioned; aware of this himself, he might well have emerged from the First World War with a belief that only a technicality had prevented him from commanding a battalion. Many of the generals had spent the 1920s in the *Freikorps* and the tiny 'Treaty' army that was permitted under Versailles. This had involved little more than staff work, training and studying and would not have impressed Hitler overly, whatever titular rank those serving had achieved by the time he erupted onto the political scene.

Plan White devoted 60 divisions to the conquest of Poland, including five Panzer divisions of 300 tanks each (Panzer means 'armoured' in German and was a generic term used by both sides to refer to German tanks of all types), four light divisions, four fully motorised divisions, as well as 3,600 operational aircraft and much of the powerful *Kriegsmarine* (German navy). Poland, meanwhile, had only 30 infantry divisions, 11 cavalry brigades, two mechanised brigades, 300 medium and light tanks, 1,154 field guns and 400 aircraft ready for combat (of which only 36 Los aircraft were not obsolete), as well as a fleet of just four modern destroyers and five submarines. As the Polish army comprised fewer than one million men, Poland tried to mobilise reservists but this was far from

complete when the blow fell from 630,000 German troops under Bock and 886,000 under Rundstedt.

That blow was swift and utterly devastating. As dawn broke on September 1st, Heinkel He-111 bombers with top speeds of 220mph carrying two-ton loads, as well as Dorniers and Junkers Ju-87 (Stuka) dive-bombers, began pounding Polish roads, airfields, railway junctions, munition dumps, mobilisation centres and cities, including Warsaw. Meanwhile, the German training ship *Schleswig-Holstein* in Danzig harbour started shelling the Polish garrison at Westerplatte. The Stukas had special sirens attached, whose screams hugely intensified the terror of those below. Much of the Polish air force was destroyed on the ground and air superiority, which was to be a vital factor in the six years of the war, was quickly asserted by the Luftwaffe. With the Messerschmitt Me-109's top speed of 290 mph, the far slower Polish planes stood little chance however brave their pilots. Furthermore, Polish anti-aircraft defences, where they existed, were inadequate.

In charge of the two armoured divisions and two light divisions of the German Army Group North was General Heinz Guderian, a long-time proselytiser for Blitzkrieg. Wielding his force as a homogenous entity, in contrast with Army Group South where tanks were split up among different units, Guderian scored amazing successes as he raced ahead of the main body of the infantry. Polish retaliation was further hampered by the vast numbers of refugees taking to the roads. Chaos ensued as they were bombed and machine-gunned from the air in further pursuance of Blitzkrieg tactics.

Hitler needed the Polish campaign to be over quickly in case of an attack in the west, but it was not until 11am on Sunday, September 3rd, that Neville Chamberlain's government finally declared war on Germany, with the French government reluctantly following suit six hours later. It soon became clear to everyone – except the ever-hopeful Poles – that the Allies were not about to assault the Siegfried Line, even though the French had 85 divisions facing 40 German. The fear of massive German air attacks devastating London and Paris partly explained Allied inaction, but even if they had attacked in the west, Poland could probably not have been saved in time. As it was, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) under Lord Gort did not start to arrive on mainland Europe until September 10th, although 13 RAF squadrons arrived in France the previous day.

What was not appreciated at the time was Hitler's ever-present fear of an attack from the west while he was dealing with matters in the east. In a letter to the deputy prison governor at Nuremberg in 1946 Keitel averred that 'what the Führer most feared and repeatedly brought up' was, firstly the possibility of a 'secret agreement between the French and Belgian general staffs for a surprise thrust by the French high-speed (motorised) forces through Belgium, and over the German frontier, so as to burst into the German industrial zone in the Ruhr' and also a 'secret agreement between the British Admiralty and the Dutch general staff for a surprise landing of British troops in Holland, for an attack on the German north flank'.

In the event, Hitler need not have worried: neither France nor Britain, let alone neutral Belgium and Holland, were so much as contemplating anything so imaginative and vigorous. It was true that Chamberlain brought the long-term anti-Nazi prophet Winston Churchill into his government as First Lord of the Admiralty, with political responsibility for the Royal Navy. That, however, was Britain's most bellicose act for the time being, except for one unsuccessful bombing raid on the Wilhelmshaven naval base on September 4th and the dropping of 12 million leaflets on Germany, urging its people to overthrow their warmongering Führer. This outcome was highly unlikely just when he was about to pull off one of Germany's greatest victories.

By September 5th the Polish Corridor was cut off entirely. The Polish Pomorze Army was destroyed in the north and the German 10th Army under General Walther von Reichenau and the 8th Army under General Johannes Blaskowitz had soon broken through and around the Polish Krakow and Lodz armies. The Polish government fled first to Lublin and thence to Romania, where they were initially welcomed, but then, under pressure from Hitler, interned.

On September 8th, Reichenau's 10th Army reached the outskirts of Warsaw, where it was initially repulsed by fierce Polish resistance. Despite years of threats by Hitler, culminating in his ominous abrogation on August 28th of the 1934 German-Polish non-aggression treaty (a curious and unusual act of legalism on his part), the Poles had not

built extensive fixed defences, preferring to rely on counter-attacks. This all changed in early September when makeshift barricades were hastily erected, anti-tank ditches dug and turpentine barrels made ready for ignition around Warsaw's city centre. Hitler's plan was to seize Warsaw before the US Congress met on September 21st and so present the world with a *fait accompli*, but that was not quite to happen.

'The Polish Army will never emerge again from the German embrace,' predicted Hermann Göring on September 9th. Up until then, the Germans had operated a textbook attack, but that night General Tadeusz Kutrzeba of the Poznan army took over the Pomorze Army and crossed the Bzura River in a brilliant attack against the flank of the German 8th Army, launching the three-day battle of Kutno which incapacitated an entire German division. Only when the Panzers of the 10th Army came back from besieging Warsaw were the Poles forced back. It is thought to be at that point that Polish cavalry armed only with lances and sabres actually charged German tanks, prompting Major-General Mellenthin to observe:

*All the dash and bravery which the Poles frequently displayed could not compensate for a lack of modern arms and serious tactical training.*

By contrast, the Wehrmacht training was superb: *Panzergrenadiers* could perform in tanks, as infantry and even as artillerymen, while all German NCOs were trained to serve as officers if the occasion demanded. Of course it helped enormously that they were the aggressors and so knew when the war was going to start.

In 1944, the Guards officer and future military historian Michael Howard went on a course 'learning everything that was to be known about the German army: its organisation, uniforms, doctrine, personnel, tactics, weapons – everything except why it was so bloody good'. Part of the answer goes back to the way that the Jünker state of Prussia had allowed bright middle-class youths to win advancement in the Prussian army, which was effectively the Prussian state itself. Status, respect and prestige attached to officers in uniform. The lesson of the great national revival of 1813 was discipline and it was not forgotten even in the defeat of 1918. Hindenburg, a defeated general after all, was elected president. The Germans were fighting their sixth war of aggression in 65 years and, as Howard also records, when it came to digging deep slit-trenches or aiming howitzers, they were simply better than the Allies. Blitzkrieg required extraordinarily close cooperation between tanks, mobile artillery, mobile infantry and the Luftwaffe, and the Germans achieved it triumphantly. It took the Allies half a war to catch up.

Although Blitzkrieg bought Germany victories in the short term, by 1942 the Allies had learnt how to deal with it and, in particular, the Red Army on the Eastern Front no longer collapsed before it. The sheer momentum necessary for its success proved impossible to maintain indefinitely. The Blitzkrieg concept can be said to have finally petered out in the fields near Prokhorovka at the battle of Kursk in July 1943, although certain elements were still traceable as late as the Ardennes Offensive (the Battle of the Bulge) in mid-December 1944. It was to be the Axis powers' repellent political ideology rather than their military strategy or tactics, that was finally to cost them the war.