

This Day in History... September 1, 1939

Germany Invades Poland

On September 1, 1939, Germany launched a land, sea, and air invasion of Poland, marking the start of World War II in Europe.

Poland has a long and varied history. At one time, Poland ruled an empire that stretched across much of central Europe. In 1795, Poland was conquered and divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria. This brought an end to Poland's centuries-old existence as a separate nation.

The Poles fought with Austria against the Russians in World War I. In 1917, a Polish National Committee was formed in Paris to win allied support for an independent Poland. Under the 1919 Treaty in Versailles, Poland regained large amounts of land from Germany. In 1921, the Russian Treaty of Riga established a border that gave back some of the Russian territory. The new Polish state faced many problems, but during the 1920s and 1930s, Poland slowly rebuilt its economy and developed uniform systems of government, transportation, and education.

Following the Treaty of Versailles, Germany, in turn, lost 13% of its territory and overseas colonies. The National Socialist (Nazi) party was formed in 1920 to unite German workers against international businesses, which were viewed as being Jewish dominated, and to draw them away from internationalism and communism. In the midst of the Great Depression, Adolph Hitler was appointed chancellor. He soon abolished parliament and became *Führer*, or "leader," in 1934. Hitler began rearming his country, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, and supporting a German nation within expanded borders.

Hitler's expansion began in 1938 with the annexation of Austria and continued with the occupation of Sudetenland and all of Czechoslovakia. These lands were taken without major fighting, and Hitler hoped the same would be true of Poland.

In August 1939, Germany signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union, to prevent them from coming to Poland's aid. The pact also included a secret clause dividing Poland between the two nations.

The invasion of Poland was planned for August 26. However the day before, Hitler learned that Britain had promised Poland military support if it was attacked. Hitler then ramped up his ongoing propaganda campaign against Poland, using a theme of aggression against Germany. Poland began to call up troops, but was encouraged by Britain and France to wait in the hopes they could convince Germany not to wage war.

But Hitler's mind was made up. On the afternoon of August 31, he sent Nazi troops in Polish uniforms to stage a fake invasion of Germany. They claimed this was an unforgivable act of aggression by the Polish and prepared to invade.

The German attack commenced early the next morning, September 1, 1939, at 4:45 a.m. Some 1.5 million Nazi troops invaded Poland's 1,750-mile shared border with Germany. At the same time, German *Luftwaffe* planes bombed Polish airfields while warships and U-boats fired on Poland's naval forces in the Baltic Sea.

The next day, Britain and France threatened Germany to withdraw by September 3, or they would declare war. Germany refused and Britain declared war, followed by Australia, New Zealand, India, and France.

Meanwhile, in Poland, the German army advanced quickly, utilizing their *blitzkrieg* ("lightning war") strategy. The *Luftwaffe* continued to bomb not just airfields, but cities as well, inflicting civilian casualties. Though Poland had managed to raise an army of 1 million men, they were outmatched. Within a week, German troops traveled 140 miles and reached the outskirts of Warsaw. The defending Polish hoped to hold out long enough to launch their own offensive, but on September 17, Soviet forces invaded from the east removing all hope of a Polish victory.

The Polish defenders held out until September 28, when they had no choice left but to surrender. Germany and the Soviet Union then split the country per their earlier agreement. During this time, Britain and France didn't provide much for military aid to Poland. In the coming months, they only launched a few small attacks on German forces. That changed in the spring of 1940 when Germany attacked Norway and France. And the following year Germany attacked the Soviet Union, breaking their nonaggression pact and capturing all of Poland.

In the coming years, a large Polish resistance force was raised and fought against the occupying Germans. After suffering six million casualties during the nearly six-year occupation, Poland was liberated in May 1945.



Flag of Poland from the Overrun Countries Series



Issued to celebrate the 1,000th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity by Poland in AD 966.



Czechoslovakia was occupied by Germany from March 15, 1939 to May 1945.



Germany's invasion of Poland came by land, sea, and air, including U-boats.

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