

# Role of Poland in World War II

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The role of Poland in World War Two is often misunderstood and under appreciated. The myth that the Poles were easily and quickly knocked out of the war is just that - a myth. Poland had the fourth largest army combating the Germans, the most highly decorated navy, the largest, and most effective, resistance organization, and made numerous other great contributions.

It was Poland responsible for the cracking of the German code, and the subsequent smuggling of an *Enigma* machine to Britain. This enabled the Allies to decode and read German messages, one of the greatest intelligence coups of all time, and one of the most important contributions of the war. Were it not for Poland, the war, at best, would have lasted longer, and at worst, would have ended in a German victory.

## The Invasion of Poland

On September 1, 1939, without a declaration of war, Germany's army, navy, and air force invaded Poland from three directions. The Germans made initial sweeping success through the use of their *blitzkrieg* tactics, which confounded the already surprised Poles. After their initial stumblings, the Polish forces regrouped behind the Vistula and Bzura rivers, and began mounting a serious defense against the German invaders.

On September 17, another surprise rocked the Poles. The Soviet Union attacked from the east, leaving the Polish Army surrounded on all sides by the two most powerful armies in the world. Despite the staggering odds, the Poles fought valiantly, making the invaders pay for every inch of ground they took. Though many people believe that Poland capitulated in a matter of days, it actually took over a month for the Germans and Soviets to achieve victory. All told, the Poles put forth a harder resistance to the Nazis than did France, which had prior warning from Germany's attack of Poland, as well as captured German plans for the invasion of France. Forces in Warsaw held out until September 27, and the "Polesie" army, commanded by General Kleeberg fought until October 6, 1939.

Poland fought the invasion of the German and Soviet forces alone, for 35 days. Though Britain and France had promised aid in the event of German aggression, and in fact declared war on Germany after the invasion of Poland, they did nothing to help the Poles. Despite repeated pleas from the Polish government, the Allies made no moves to aid Poland, or even to hinder Germany. During this time, the Polish forces created ideal conditions for the Allied forces to engage the Axis forces from the west. For all of their verbal support, however, the Allies failed to back their words with action. Had they taken advantage of the decidedly advantageous situation, World War II might have lasted only months, or even weeks, instead of years.

Many myths surround the German invasion of Poland. The most widespread myth is that of the infamous Polish cavalry charge against German armor, which was originally reported by the Italian press, and became popular with German propagandists. The true story came from a skirmish where two Polish Lancer squadrons engaged and destroyed some German infantry. After the infantry had been defeated, German armored vehicles appeared. Exposed, the Lancers were decimated. Italian war correspondents came upon the scene and were told by German soldiers that it resulted from the cavalry having charged the tanks. The false story was then spread, and the truth was effectively buried.

Contrary to popular view that the Polish Air Force was destroyed on the ground, the fact is that Polish squadrons were dispersed to special runways, and later evacuated to Britain. The pilots were well trained and fierce fighters, but their planes were a generation behind the Luftwaffe and greatly outnumbered. Despite this, Polish fighters and anti-aircraft batteries shot down a surprisingly large number of German aircraft.

Later in the war, after the Polish government and armed forces fled to England, Polish airmen played a vital part in the Battle of Britain. At the peak of the fighting, twelve percent of the pilots fighting over England were Poles. This enabled the exhausted Fighter Command to maintain its operational strength, replacing killed and wounded British pilots with Polish pilots. The quality of the Polish pilots counted even more than their numbers. A Polish fighter squadron, No. 303, became the highest scoring fighter squadron in the Royal Air Force. More than 12% of the total number of German planes shot down were shot down by Polish pilots.

Like the air force, the Polish Navy also made valuable contributions. Despite its small size, the Polish Navy took part in an amazing number of operations. It was everywhere, from the Mediterranean to the Baltic, and it took part in every major landing, from North Africa all the way through to Normandy. The courage and determination of the Polish sailors was outstanding. The Polish Navy won the most decorations, per capita, of any naval force among the Allies.

The Polish destroyer *ORP Piorun* was the first Allied ship to engage the *Bismark* in the battle in which the great German battleship was sunk.

### **Scientific, Intelligence, and Other Contributions**

In addition to the armed efforts of the Polish soldiers, Poland contributed to the Allied victory with a series of discoveries, technical achievements, monetary aid, and intelligence coups.

Before the war, Polish Secret Service mathematicians and cryptographers managed to break the most secret German codes. Polish built copies of the *Enigma* machine were given to France and Britain in July 1939. The ability to read coded German communications contributed greatly to the allied victory, and played a major role in the formulation of intelligence and battle plans.

A device was invented by the Polish Navy that could take bearings on the origin of short waves. With this, the Allies could locate German U-Boats after they sent radio messages, allowing convoys to avoid known U-Boat locations. This was extremely important, since German U-Boats extracted a heavy toll on Allied Merchant Marine shipping, in addition to sinking warships. The United States **alone** lost over 7000 Merchant Marine vessels, which resulted in loss of life, but worse for the war effort, loss of incredible amounts of materiel. The Polish short wave device allowed a greater number of ships to navigate the Atlantic safely, which boosted the war effort tremendously.

One of the better known operations of the Polish Secret Service was the identification of the main base of the V-1 and V-2 rockets on the Peenemunde Peninsula. When some of the experimental rockets were transferred to Poland, the Polish AK (Home Army) managed to intercept one of the rockets and transport it to England. The Polish secret service also managed to obtain technical and tactical information on the rockets.

The mine detector was also a Polish contribution. Lt. Jozef Kos invented the first metal detector, and realized that it could be used to detect mines. Constructed in Scotland by Polish officers, it consisted of a plate, mounted on a wooden arm, which could detect and locate metal objects underground. When a mine was detected, the detector would send a buzzing noise to earphones worn by the operator.

When the Polish Government-in-Exile fled Poland for Britain, they took with them large amounts of Poland's gold reserves. These reserves provided great aid to a financially stricken Britain, allowing them to purchase desperately needed war materiel.

### **North Africa and Italy**

The operations in North Africa marked the first major theatrical defeat of the Axis powers. The eviction of the Axis from North Africa opened the way for dominance of the Mediterranean, and the invasion of Italy. The turning point in the battle for North Africa came at Tobruk, Egypt, in August 1941.

Tobruk was besieged by the Afrika Korps in early August. The Polish Carpathian Brigade was assigned to defend the toughest eastern defense sector behind the Ras el Madauar hill. With their Australian comrades, the Poles successfully defended Tobruk, repulsing numerous German attacks. When the 8th army again went on the offensive, the Carpathian Brigade took Medauar hill, and White Knoll hill. The brigade continued in pursuit of the enemy, with operations for the continuation of the North African war.

Through 1944, the Polish II Corps fought alongside the Americans and British Armies in the Italian campaign. Their most spectacular success came at Monte Cassino, where they opened the road to Rome by knocking out the citadel of Monte Cassino, which had defied numerous assaults by other Allied forces. The Poles were able to do something that no American or British Army had been able to do. In addition to Monte Cassino, the Poles also captured Ancona and Bologna.

### **Normandy**

Beginning with D-Day on June 6, 1944, the Battle of Normandy lasted for three months. By August, the Canadian 1st Army had driven a wedge into the German line, heading south to join up with the American 3rd Army. The Germans, fearing they would be surrounded, redoubled their defense.

The Polish 1st Armored Division, with its Canadian comrades, was given the task of breaking the German line and completing the encirclement of the Germans. The Poles were determined to avenge German atrocities in Poland, and continued to attack even when they lost contact with the Canadians. They single-handedly blocked the Germans from escaping for a week. The carnage wrought the Poles at Falaise Gap was perhaps the bloodiest of the battle. The last German reserves of tanks and heavy equipment were destroyed here, and organized German resistance ceased to exist anywhere in France after the Battle of the Falaise Gap.

### **Operation Market-Garden**

The Polish Parachute Brigade was made up of soldiers who had escaped from Poland, and also of volunteers from Polish emigre communities around the world. The Brigade took part in the largest airborne operation of the war (and in history) at Arnhem and Driel in Holland. Although they knew that their heavy anti-tank equipment had been lost, the Poles decided against aborting, and chose to jump

anyway. Without their big guns, the Brigade's soldiers suffered heavy losses attempting to reinforce the valiant British commandos holding the bridge over the Rhine.

The last German victory of the war, Operation Market-Garden, was doomed from the beginning. Poor planning, leadership, and execution on the part of British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery led to a hopeless situation for the men on the ground. Only the brilliant drive by George S. Patton's Third Army prevented defeat from becoming massacre.

### **The Warsaw Uprising**

The Polish Home Army had been active since 1939, having set up the most effective partisan and espionage system of any of the Allies. By 1944, the Home Army had more than 400,000 soldiers and agents, operating from the English Channel to eastern Siberia.

On August 1, 1944 the Home Army in Warsaw rose up against the Germans, believing they would be relieved by the Soviets, who were fewer than 20 kilometers away. They captured the whole city but had ammunition sufficient for only a week.

These soldiers were loyal to the legal government of Poland located in London, England. Stalin ordered his armies to stop and wait until the Germans put down the uprising, knowing that this would kill off the Polish leadership and make it easier for his "Lublin Committee" puppet government to be installed. Not only did the Soviets cease their advance, but they also refused to allow Allied planes to land on Russian airfields after they dropped supplies to the Polish freedom fighters. But the Warsaw garrison fought on for two months, with little more than their bare hands and raw courage.

More than 200,000 Polish soldiers were killed, as were hundreds of thousands of civilians, murdered by the Germans during the uprising or shipped off to Auschwitz-Birkenau after the garrison surrendered. The Germans destroyed most of the city during the fighting, and later burned whatever buildings were still standing. More than 90 per cent of Warsaw, including almost 100 percent of the Old Town, was destroyed.

The Warsaw Uprising was not the only example of Soviet atrocities committed against Poles. The mass graves at Katyn were discovered in 1943. The remains of more than 5,000 Polish officers were discovered, with hands still bound, and with a single bullet wound to the back of their head. Stalin had ordered the execution of the Polish officer corps, in hopes of dampening resistance. Many more mass graves of Polish officers, soldiers and civilians are in the old Soviet Union, yet their location is known only to the perpetrators, most of whom are long dead, many by the same methods they used on Poles. The Allies, fearing the reaction of the Soviet Union, decided to remain quiet on the issue of such murders.

### **After the War**

Unlike after World War I, where the Allies stood by Poland in the post-war negotiations, retaining her borders and sovereignty, after the end of World War Two, Poland was abandoned, and "given" to the Soviet Union. At Teheran, and other meetings of the Big Three, the British and Americans agreed to let the Russians keep Polish lands awarded them after the invasion of Poland in 1939. This miscarriage of justice was kept quiet by the Allies, and is widely unknown. Then, at Yalta, the Allies placed Poland into the Soviet sphere of influence. This

last step effectively gave the Soviets the green light for the full-scale occupation of Poland.

The final injustice--having the fourth largest combatant force fighting the Germans, Poland should have had a prominent place in the Victory parade. The Poles, however, and all of their crucial efforts, hardships, and victories, were forsaken once again. The Polish soldiers were forced to watch from the side, as others marched triumphantly, even though they had taken a leading role in the defeat of Germany.

Over a half million fighting men and women, and six million civilians, more than **18% of the population**, lost their lives. Approximately 90% of Polish war losses were victims of prisons, death camps, raids, executions, starvation, excessive work and ill treatment.

Poland lost 38% of its national assets, as compared to Britain which lost 0.8% and France which lost 1.5%. Worse yet, a part of Poland, was also lost. The eastern provinces were annexed by the Soviets, including the two great Polish cities of Lwow and Wilno.

Polish soldiers in the west could not return home, for they were branded traitors by the new communist regime. Soldiers still in Poland fared worse, for many were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even executed by the Soviets, simply because they belonged to the Polish Home Army.

Of all the warring nations, Poland was among the most devastated. The loss of life and resources, while terrible under any circumstance, was made harsher by the loss of territory and sovereignty to the Soviets. For all of her contributions, Poland was treated almost as an enemy by the Allies. Though Poland was forgotten, the role that she and her citizens played in the defeat of Germany is too important to be forgotten as well.