

Defensive war 1939

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19.04.2024, 02:25

The Kraków Army goes to war

In spring 1939, the “West” Defence Plan was approved by the General Inspector of the Armed Forces, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. It envisaged the defence of the entire border with the Third Reich, but the defence of Silesia and southern Lesser Poland was to be of particular importance.

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particular importance. The Kraków Army was created in Warsaw on 23 March 1939. The Army Command, led by General Antoni Szylling, was code named "Training Command Antoni" and was located in the Sobieski barracks on Warszawska Street (in the current building of the Kraków University of Technology). Two days later, General Szylling issued an order to the commanders of his divisions to *"defend Silesia and the region of Kraków with no option of retreat"*. The Seventh Infantry Division of General Janusz Gąsiorowski, occupying the entire Częstochowa-Tarnowskie Góry frontline section, was to defend the route to Kielce and Warsaw. The forces of the 23rd Infantry Division of General Jan Jagmin-Sadowski and of the 55th Infantry Division of Colonel Stanisław Kalabiński were stationed in Upper Silesia. Shielded by concrete fortifications, they were ordered to ensure a permanent defence of the area. The rocky Silesian valley was to form a kind of "hinge" around which the Polish defence line would turn (the Pomeranian, Poznań and Łódź Armies moving to the so-called line of great rivers). The garrisons of the 21st (Sub-Carpathian) Infantry Division of General Józef Kustroń were scattered across the area from Bogumin to Nowy Sącz and were ordered to hide the entire section of the border from view. The 6th Infantry Division of General Bernard Mond remained as a reserve in the region of Kraków. The Kraków Cavalry Brigade of General Zygmunt Piasecki was to fill the gap between the 7th Infantry Division and the core forces of the Army.

The construction of border fortifications started in May. In July, the battalions of the Border Defence Corps were transformed into the 1st Mountain Brigade, which manned the border from Żywiec to the Tatra Mountains. On 12 August, the 10th Cavalry Brigade of Colonel Stanisław Maczek was assigned to the reserves of the Army, which made it possible to move the 6th Infantry Division to the area of Pszczyna. On 23 August, thousands of households were delivered orders for reservists to report to their units. The general mobilization was announced on 29 August, to be cancelled several hours later and renewed again on 30 August.

Ultimately, five Polish divisions and four brigades (including one motorized brigade) in the South faced 18 German divisions, including six armoured and “light” (armoured and motorized) divisions.

The 1st day of September marked the German invasion. The Kraków Army Command received a call a few minutes after 5:00 a.m. Colonel Janusz Gaładyk *dutifully reported (...) the entire Valley of Orava is bustling with hundreds of tanks, transport and armoured vehicles heading towards Jabłonka, Spytkowice and Czarny Dunajec. Do not get me wrong - the 1st Regiment of the Border Defence Corps will serve as Leonidas, but do think about your flank and rear. The 10th Cavalry Brigade in the vicinity of Wola Justowska was alerted and ordered “not to let the enemy leave the mountain ravines...”.*

The Germans were in a hurry because they had planned to capture Kraków that same day, while the core Polish forces were to remain surrounded in their positions near the border. However, the anti-tank squadron of the Cavalry Brigade, the uhlans of the 24th Regiment and the battalion of the Border Defence Corps held their positions for 36 hours. When a wave of German tanks of the 2nd Armoured Division crossed the ridge of Ludwika’s Hill (dozens of burning wrecks remained on the slope), the Poles darted to the next mountain range several hundred meters away. The German “fast” units kept moving approx. 8 km a day for five subsequent days.

The 5th Armoured Division of General Vietinghoff started its attack to the south of the Silesian fortifications. It crushed the 1st Battalion of the 75th Infantry Regiment defending Rybnik. In Żory, it forced the National Defence Battalion out of its way. However, Pszczyna, with the Designated Formation of the 6th Infantry Division positioned in the trenches on the outskirts of Pszczyna, was the next stop on their way. Intoxicated by their former successes, the Germans ignored the situation. They hit immediately, without preparing for the attack by extending the column, which caused significant losses under the fire of the well-prepared defence. They repeated their attack a few hours later. The Stuka dive bombers attacked the artillery positions deep in

the defence line, while the barrage of artillery fire paved the way for the tanks. The fire of three Polish battalions chipped away at the attackers once more. However, the tanks reached the trenches, crushed them down over a several-hundred-meter section and went further along the way to Brzeźce where the cannons of the 1st Division of the 6th Light Artillery Regiment were positioned. The cannons were silent for a while; due to damaged telephone lines the gun crews had no information and could not support the infantry. When the first tanks with crosses on their turrets emerged out of the dust and smoke, the barrels positioned to shoot "straight ahead" spat out fire. The tanks kept fighting against the cannons which were completely uncovered for a quarter of an hour or so. The Polish infantry, with the support of the anti-tank Bofors guns counterattacked on the flank. The Germans retreated, leaving 30 tanks in flames.

On 2 September, General Vietinghoff was more successful - 130 tanks emerged out of thick fog before the Polish trenches in Goczałkowice at around 10 o'clock. The fierce fire of anti-tank guns did not do any good. They burst through the trenches and fell on the positions of the 2nd Division of the 6th Light Artillery Regiment. The cannon barrels lowered again. However, the Germans were too close. The tank tracks crushed the cannons and people shooting until the very end. The armoured spearhead split. One group moved back to the positions of the 20th Infantry Regiment, while the rest retreated. The retreat of the 6th Infantry Division roused the last two battalions of the 16th Infantry Regiment. They were alerted to hold and defend the village of Ćwiklice. However, the tanks were quicker, arriving in the village earlier, and then they kept advancing. Two waves crossed with each other in an open field. Every inch of the meadow of Ćwiklice was churned up by the artillery and tank tracks. Just Scheu, a German war correspondent, wrote "*the Poles delivered a fantastic fight, individual heavy machine guns and the anti-tank unit kept fighting until they were crushed by the tanks*". The battalions of Tarnów escaped into the forest, decimated. However, the 5th Armoured Division suffered such huge losses in the battle that its attack faltered.

The 17th Infantry Corps attacked between the armoured wedges. Its 7th Division took two days to conquer four Polish shelters in Węgierska Górka. The Valley of the Soła River could not be crossed until the stock of ammunition and machine guns ran out. When there were no more cartridges left, the defenders of the "Waligóra", "Wąwóz" and "Włóczęga" units escaped into the forest. "Wędrowiec" kept blocking the valley alone until the afternoon hours of 3 September. When they ran out of ammunition, the unit under the command of Captain Tadeusz Semik surrendered. The wounded officer was beaten over the head with a pistol. Rifleman Jan Tlałka was murdered.

At the crack of dawn on 3 September, six *Karaś* reconnaissance planes of the 24th Reconnaissance Squadron took off from the field airport in Klimontów. More than half an hour later, they attacked a column of the 2nd Armoured Division in the vicinity of Podwilk by surprise. The same method of attack was used near Klikuszowa where the *Karaś* planes of the 31st Reconnaissance Squadron bombed the 4th Light Division.

General A. Szylling understood on 2 September that his forces would not manage to hold their positions. He asked the Commander-in-Chief to approve a retreat to the East and was allowed to do so. The retreat of the Polish Divisions to the East started on 3 September, often overtaken by the Germans who forced them to fight their way through with bayonets and grenades.

The combat came to a bloody end for other divisions on the rivers of Pilica and Vistula, Dunajec, San, Bug, Wereszyca and Tanew.

The 7th Division - on Złoty Potok. The 22nd Infantry Division - in the vicinity of Staszów. The 21st Mountain Infantry Division - in the forests of Ułazów in the Region of Lublin. The 23rd Infantry Division, the Kraków Cavalry Brigade and the Warsaw Armoured-Motor Brigade (of the Lublin Army) - in the area of Tomaszów Lubelski. The 6th Infantry Division - in the forests of Wereszyca. The Silesian fortress units - in the vicinity of Maziły.

None of the Polish groupings formally surrendered. On the River of Wereszyca, General Mond ordered the destruction of heavy weapons and disbanding of the units, whose officers and soldiers were to reach Romania on their own. At 10:00 p.m. on 19 September, General Piskor gave the order to notify the Germans by radio that his units would stop the struggle at 2:00 a.m. on 20 September in the vicinity of Tomaszów. The Germans treated this as an act of capitulation and decided to occupy lodgings in neighbourhood villages. However, in all the units of the Polish artillery, nearly identical conversations took place. The commanders would ask their quartermasters how much ammunition was still available and were informed that there were from two to five cartridges per cannon. Although they had not made any agreement earlier, they issued identical orders: shoot out the entire stock of ammunition against the German position and destroy the equipment afterwards.

After the end of the last heavy artillery fire, the Polish positions resounded only with the clatter of hammers crushing sights, and making holes in hydraulic recoil mechanisms and machine gun cooling systems.

A rustle along the forest floor could be heard afterwards as they covered regiment flags, officers' Vis pistols, soldiers' Mausers and the last remaining grenades. It took only a dozen or so months before they turned out to be useful again.

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