

The Naval War in the Baltic, September – November 1939

*By Donald Stoker**

In the inter-war period the states of the Eastern Baltic embarked upon numerous efforts at collective security. The Poles achieved the greatest coup, an alliance with France that provided for French intervention in the event of war. Unfortunately for all of the parties involved, the progress of technology in the late 1930s, as well as the rearmament of Germany, made this agreement tenuous at best. After 1933 the French could not keep their naval commitment to Poland in the event of a war with Germany without paying a devastating cost. British intervention in the region, even if they had not already abandoned the area to its more aggressive residents, would have been just as disastrous. Immediately preceding the outbreak of war, Britain and France did guarantee Poland. By this time though, it was too late, and the promise proved hollow.

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union took advantage of the power vacuum created by British and French abandonment of the Baltic region and signed the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The agreement delineated clear spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and led to yet another partition of Poland. The pact cleared the path for Hitler's war against Poland and allowed Stalin to extend the grip of the Soviet regime.¹

On September 1st, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, sparking a war that consumed great tracts of Europe. Many in the Nazi hierarchy welcomed the invasion and viewed it as the first step on the path toward German domination of the continent. Grand-Admiral Erich Raeder, the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, was not so quick to applaud the onset of war. The German Army and Air Force were prepared to embark upon offensive operations, but only the first faltering steps had been taken toward the creation of a strong German navy. Raeder, who built the German fleet while working under the impression that no major conflict would occur before 1944, found his forces in battle before he felt them ready. The war against Poland, and the conflicts subsequent extension to the west, forced the German navy to fight with the scant forces it possessed. Combined British and French naval superiority was

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crushing, somewhere on the order of ten-to-one, leading Raeder to comment that “in any war with England, the German Navy could do little more than go down fighting.” (Raeder, 1960:280-281)

The only theatre in which the German Navy exerted a decisive influence during the early stages of the war, and arguably at anytime, was the Baltic Sea. This was due more to the dictates of geography and the weakness of their opponents than German strength. Control of the Baltic was of vital importance to the Reich. This guaranteed the flow of Swedish iron ore to German industry, safeguarded trade with Scandinavia, and insured the successful transit of military units and supplies. The Baltic was also an extremely valuable training area for the navy, being the only place where submarine crews could be prepared without the threat of enemy interference. Maintaining control of this sea, as well as the sea lines of supply and communication to East Prussia, proved the navy’s primary tasks. (Doenitz, 1990:398; Bachmann, 1971:197)

Fortunately for Raeder, the Poles possessed meagre naval forces. The combined tonnage of all Polish fighting ships was only 14443 tons, less than that of either of the German pre-Dreadnought battleships *Schleswig-Holstein* and *Schlesien*, which displaced 14900 tons. The *Bismarck* (though not yet ready) alone displaced nearly three times this amount - 41700 tons. The Polish Navy had one destroyer flotilla consisting of *Wicher*, *Burza*, *Grom*, and *Blyskawica*, one submarine flotilla of five submarines, *Wilk*, *Zbik*, *Rys*, *Orzeł*, and *Sęp*, and a minelayer, *Gryf*. Poland also possessed a few smaller vessels: a squadron of 12 torpedo boats, 12 trawlers, a number of river monitors, and the hydrographic ship *Pomorzanin*. Polish navy personnel numbered only 300 officers and 3200 other ranks. (Baginski, 1942a:98-99; Showall, 1979:130, 136; Robinson, 1942:1682; Jurga, 1970:266-267)

By comparison, the German navy fielded overwhelming naval force: three pocket-battleships, one heavy and six light cruisers, 34 torpedo boats and destroyers, and 57 submarines, as well as the aforementioned pre-dreadnought battleships, numerous minesweepers and other light vessels, and extensive air support from the *Luftwaffe*. Raeder had hoped to have more. Famously, his “Z Plan” had called for the construction of a world-class navy, but it had been composed on the assumption that there would be no war this early. For the *Kriegsmarine*, the war had come too soon. Raeder did not commit all of his available forces against Poland, but this

was hardly necessary. (Thomas, 1990:179, 188)

A decision (albeit a wise one) made two days before the German invasion by Admiral Jerzy Swirski, the chief of the Polish navy, reduced what the little strength the Poles possessed. It was decided that since German mastery of the Baltic made it unlikely that Poland would receive any substantial support from its allies that the three most modern destroyers, *Błyskawica*, *Grom*, and *Burza*, should sail to Britain to fight alongside the Royal Navy. The two nations signed an agreement on the issue shortly before the outbreak of the war and the trio departed on August 30th, 1939. (Baginski, 1942a:99-100, Flisowski, 1991:66; Garlinski, 1995:17-18)

The destroyers received special and detailed instructions from Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Jozef Unrug. The ships left Poland so as to arrive after sunset between Bornholm and Christiansö Islands. The Poles had orders that upon encountering other ships or planes they were to pretend that they were doing exercises. After dark, they were to increase speed so as to pass Malmö around midnight (Unrug report, 1992:331-332).² Before an official declaration of hostilities they were to take action only in response to a clear act of aggression. If war erupted, they would receive the signal “smok” (smoke). Then, they were not to evade battle unless the enemy had a clear and significant advantage. After exhausting all options, the flotilla was to seek refuge in a neutral port, preferably a Swedish one. Barring this, they were to return home, if they could. If they found this impossible, they had orders to scuttle their ships to prevent them from falling into German hands. The signal for the departure for Bornholm and Christiansö was “Nanking.” When they reached this point, the flotilla would receive another signal, “Peking.” After this, the destroyers were to sail immediately for Great Britain. (*Ibid.*)

Four German destroyers spotted the Polish ships and shadowed them for some time. Reconnaissance aircraft also kept the trio under continuous observation. But a state of war did not yet exist between the two powers and consequently, the German ships broke-off the chase and returned to their base at Swinemünde on the north German coast. The Polish destroyers arrived in Britain on September 1st, 1939. (Whitley, 1983:98; report, Aug. 31st, 1984, [microfilm], roll 1, 17)

On August 30th, two days before the Germans started the war, the Polish government issued a navigation advisory for its coastal regions. The

warning, broadcast in Polish and English, stated that an area three miles from the Polish coast had been mined. The order gave longitude and latitude coordinates and ordered all approaching vessels to request a pilot. In reality, the operations had not yet been carried out. The Poles did plan to mine the area, and had about 1000 mines for this purpose, but the maritime authorities wanted to be sure that all vessels coming to Gdynia had first been forewarned. (Guillot to Ministre de la Marine, 1939a)

The German navy, not expecting the conflict to spread to the west, concentrated the bulk of its forces against the Poles. The *Kriegsmarine* received fairly straightforward orders. Its tasks in the war against Poland included establishing a blockade of the Bay of Danzig, neutralizing Polish warships, and providing support for the army, especially during the conquest of the Westerplatte, Gdynia, Gdansk (Danzig), and the Hel peninsula. (Maier et al., 1979:159)

Vice-Admiral Conrad Densch commanded the German forces at sea from his flagship, the light cruiser *Nürnberg*. Two other light cruisers, *Leipzig* and *Köln*, accompanied *Nürnberg*. A flotilla of ten destroyers, six motor torpedo boats, 21 minesweepers of various types, five small escort vessels, and ten submarines lent additional weight. The Germans also committed the pre-dreadnought battleship *Schleswig-Holstein*. She and her escort had arrived in Danzig on August 25th on a “courtesy visit” conducted under the premise of honouring the memory of the crew of the German cruiser *Magdeburg*. The Polish press quickly condemned the presence of the German warships, which had been agreed to by the Polish government. *Magdeburg* had been sunk in the Baltic during World War I, 25 years to the day of the *Schleswig-Holstein’s* arrival, and her deceased crewmen lay buried in Danzig. The battleship had orders to remain in the shallow waters of the harbour so that even if it was bombed or hit by Polish shells it would not sink completely, but come to rest on the harbour bottom. It soon became apparent to the German naval commanders that the forces employed by the *Kriegsmarine* were unnecessarily large, perhaps even dangerously so. The Polish submarine flotilla constituted the major threat to the German forces. These boats had put to sea prior to hostilities and the German cruisers operating close to shore in the confined waters of the Polish coast were potentially easy targets. The Germans withdrew the three cruisers and three of the submarines westward by September 2nd. However, the German naval forces were strengthened on September 21st by the arrival of the *Schleswig-Holstein’s* sister-ship, *Schlesien*. (Whitley, 1983:99; Baginski, 90

1942a:100; Stjernfelt & Bohme, 1979:42; report, Aug. 23rd, 1939; Piekalkiewicz, 1987:17; Gruillot to Ministre de la Marine, 1939b)

At 0445 hours on September 1st, 1939, the *Schleswig-Holstein* and her escort of torpedo boats, gunboats, and minesweepers, fired the first shots of the German campaign in Poland, and of World War II. Their targets were the Polish fortifications on the Westerplatte peninsula in Danzig. A League of Nations resolution of December 9th, 1925 allowed Poland to maintain a military installation and 88 soldiers on the Westerplatte. In March 1939, with the threat of war looming on the horizon, this force was augmented by an additional detachment of 50 men. (Stjernfelt & Bohme, 1979:11; Rohwer, Hümmelchen & Weis, 2005:1; Bethell, 1972:1; Baginski, 1942a:100)

After a brief bombardment, which took place at a distance of only a few hundred meters, the 225-man naval assault force “Hennigsen” landed in an attempt to seize the Westerplatte. They were immediately driven off. A second assault followed. It too was repulsed. The attackers suffered heavy casualties, 83 of their 225 effectives were killed, including the commander, or wounded. The battle for this mile-long strip of Danzig harbour lasted until September 7th when the Poles surrendered after running out of food and water. The German press called the area “kleines Verdun” (little Verdun) because of the several hundred Germans killed in attacks on the site. (Detwiler, 1979:78; report, Sept. 2nd, 1939; Koburger Jr., 1989:23; Bethell, 1972:134)

Early on September 1st, German aircraft flew reconnaissance missions over the Polish naval base at Gdynia. The majority of Poland’s remaining surface naval units, the destroyer *Wicher*, the minelayer *Gryf*, the torpedo boat *Mazurek*, and a number of auxiliary vessels, lay at anchor here. Several hours later, German bombers appeared over the base and attacked the ships, sinking *Mazurek* and the depot ship *Baltyk*, and forcing the remaining craft to flee. The smaller vessels went to Puck Bay, near Hela, where later they either fell victim to air attack or were scuttled by their crews. The *Wicher* and the *Gryf* sailed to the Hela naval base in the Gulf of Danzig. (Robinson, 1942:1683; Baginski, 1942a:101)

With the German attack, the submarines put into action operation “Worek,” the Polish navy’s plan for deploying these boats in the event of war with Germany. Two boats, *Orzeł* and *Wilk*, were to operate in Danzig

Bay, the other three off the coast of Hela. Because of their small munitions supply, and the heavy threat from the German fleet, particularly the large number of Nazi submarines, the Polish boats had orders to concentrate their efforts against larger German vessels such as battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. Enemy merchant ships could only be attacked if the submarines followed the prize rules of the 1938 convention Poland had signed with London. This committed the attacking submarines to making an effort to insure the safety of merchant crews, and to attack only after issuing a warning. (Bachmann, 1970:19)

The submariners also had instructions similar to those given to the Polish destroyer crews. They should fight the enemy as long as possible and finally, if no safe base existed in Poland, try to make their way to a British port. If this did not seem possible, the submarines should then proceed to a neutral port, except for a Soviet one. (*Ibid.*, p. 20)

On August 26th, with the war-clouds looming, the Chief of the Polish submarine division, Commander Aleksander Mohuczy, and his staff, had moved the three mine-laying submarines *Sep*, *Rys*, and *Zbik*, to Hela. The vessels only carried 20 mines each, one half of their capacity. The Poles had 1000 type 07 mines, ex-Russian models, for the surface ships, but the submarines could only use the French type H 5. The submarines *Orzel* and *Wilk* remained in Gdynia. (*Ibid.*)

In the pre-dawn hours of September 1st, the Polish submarines put plan "Worek" into action and sailed for their respective duty stations. At 0500 hours on September 1st, German destroyers arrived off the Gulf of Danzig and near Hela, having sailed from their Pillau base at 0332 hours. The destroyers had orders to conduct mercantile warfare off the Polish coast and search for blockade-runners. During the day, they stopped and searched several ships, including neutral Greek and Norwegian vessels. Polish submarines patrolled the area and throughout the day the German escort vessel *F7* and the destroyers *Ibn* and *Steinbrinck* reported sightings. The Polish submarine *Wilk* unsuccessfully attacked the latter. Encounters between the Polish submarines and other German ships followed, but produced little except minor damage, usually inflicted on the Polish submarines by German depth charges. (*Ibid.*, p. 22-25; Baginski, 1942a:101-102)

The Hela peninsula housed a second important Polish naval base. Its

defence centred on four uncompleted forts, was led by Rear-Admiral Unrug. Unrug, before the creation of the modern Polish state, had been a senior officer in the Imperial German Navy. During the latter years of World War I, he commanded the German submarine training forces where one of his most capable students had been Karl Dönitz. Unrug, and the 4000 men serving under him, mounted a stubborn defence of the peninsula. It was one of the last areas of Polish territory to capitulate, doing so only on October 1st, 1939. (Baginski, 1942a:101, Piekalkiewicz, 1987:18; Whitley, 1983:100; Koburger, 1989:23)

On September 3rd, the German destroyers *Leberecht Maass* and *Zenker* received orders to patrol the harbour at Hela and identify the warships therein. During their approach, they found the destroyer *Wicher* and the minelayer *Gryf*. The German destroyers struck, *Maas* engaging *Wicher* and *Zenker* attacking *Gryf*. The Germans opened fire at 14000 yards. The Polish ships replied, as did a shore battery of six-inch guns. The Poles shot well, forcing the German destroyers to increase their speed to 27 knots and take evasive action. This, combined with the laying of a smoke screen by the German destroyers, seriously hindered German fire control. At 0657 hours, the Polish shore battery scored a hit on the starboard Number Two gun deck of the *Maas*, killing four members of the gun crew and wounding the remaining four. The action continued inconclusively and at 0735 hours, the German destroyers were ordered to withdraw and return to Pillau to refuel. Shortly afterward, Hela was attacked by German aircraft. Junkers Ju-87 “*Stukas*” sank the *Wicher*, while other German bombers destroyed the minelayer *Gryf*. Before its destruction, *Gryf* had managed to sow its mines in the Baltic, but the effort proved futile as the *Gryf* had “laid her mines with their firing mechanisms still set on safe.” (Whitley, 1983:100; report, Sept. 3rd, 1939; Koburger, 1989:23)

Other Polish vessels suffered from German air attacks and the *Luftwaffe* proved the greatest danger to the Polish ships. On September 3rd, at Jastarnia, near Hela, the Germans sank two minesweepers and the gunboat *General Haller*. As the war progressed, and the Poles realized that further defence of Gdynia was impossible, the Polish Navy expended several vessels as block ships at the entrance of the port in an attempt to render it useless to the Germans. The garrison at Gdynia, a combined force of soldiers, sailors, and Home Guard battalions raised from the local population, all under the command of Colonel Stanislaw Dabek, resisted German attacks for 20 days. They surrendered only after they had

exhausted their ammunition and the majority of the defenders had become casualties. (Baginski, 1942a:97, 100-101; Rohwer et al., 2005:2)³

On the night of September 3-4th, the Polish submarines *Rys*, *Wilka*, and *Zbik* began to sew mines north of the Vistula River estuary. By September 6th they laid a total of 50 mines in three barrages before being forced to withdraw in the face of depth charge attacks by Captain Friedrich Ruge's 1st Minesweeping Flotilla. The Germans cleared the first two barrages, but the third claimed the German minesweeper *M.85* on October 1st. The Polish submarines, despite all having suffered damage from German attacks, continued their patrols and began operating between the Danish island of Bornholm and the Gulf of Danzig, though without success. On September 11th they received orders to either attempt to get through to Britain or allow themselves to be interned in Sweden upon exhausting their supplies. *Wilka* reached Britain on September 20th. *Rys*, *Zbik*, and *Sep* were interned in Sweden by September 25th. (Bachmann, 1970:28-30)

The remaining Polish submarine, *Orzeł*, with a crew of 29 officers and men, had a different fate. During the first days of the war, *Orzeł* cruised off the Polish coast where it suffered damage from a depth charge attack. The crew, after making repairs, sailed to the coast of the Swedish island of Gotland. Next, after obtaining permission from the Estonian government, the *Orzeł* made for Tallinn (Reval) to disembark its commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Henryk Kloczowski, who was suffering from a serious illness. The German minister in Tallinn convinced the Estonian government to confiscate *Orzeł's* maps and navigational instruments, despite this being a breach of international law. The Estonians also began to disarm the vessel by removing 14 of its 20 torpedoes and the breech mechanism from its 3.5-inch deck gun. (Rohwer et al., 2005:4; Robinson 1942:1683; The Baltic Times, 1939:1)

On the night of September 17-18th the crew of the *Orzeł* kidnapped the Estonian guards assigned to their ship, sawed through the steel cables holding the boat to the dock, and departed Tallinn. Fire from the coastal batteries failed to keep the submarine from reaching the open sea. Possessing no maps or navigational instruments, but still having a few torpedoes *Orzeł*, now under the command of its first officer, Lieutenant-Commander Jan Grudzinski, patrolled the Baltic in an unsuccessful search for German targets. On October 6th, *Orzeł* passed through the Belts and began a cruise in the North Sea that lasted until October 14th. His fuel

nearly exhausted, Grudzinski radioed the British Admiralty for instructions and then joined the *Orzeł's* sister ship, *Wilk*, in the British port of Rosyth. (Baginski, 1942a:102; Robinson, 1942:1683-1684; Roskill, 1954:69; Rohwer et al., 2005:4; Gallienne to Foreign Office, 1939)

The German navy, after overcoming what little resistance the Poles could offer, established a blockade of Polish ports. Afterward, it had little to do other than protect convoys moving between Stettin, other German ports, and East Prussia, and prevent the escape of the few remaining Polish naval and merchant vessels. The Polish surface vessels that had not fled before the war were all destroyed or captured, but all five of the Polish submarines escaped, three to neutral Sweden, and two to ports in Britain. The majority of the Polish merchant fleet also escaped. Of the 135000 tons of merchant shipping possessed by Poland on the outbreak of war, 10000 tons were sunk in Gdynia harbour. The other 125000 tons reached Britain, and after an October 1939 agreement, cooperated with the British Merchant Marine. Much of the surviving 125000 tons of shipping was not in the Baltic on September 1st, having already been ordered to sail to Britain. The German Navy can hardly be faulted for their escape. Three Polish ships, *Poznan*, *Slask*, and *Rozewie*, which had remained in the Baltic to maintain Poland's communications with Sweden and Finland, managed to slip through the Skaggerak and Kattegat, despite the minefields and the German navy. (Detwiler, 1979:78, 90; Baginski, 1942a:97-98, 101-102; Baginski, 1942b:162)

The collapse of Poland did not put an end to the German-Polish naval war. The vessels and sailors that escaped to Britain continued the fight alongside their allies, led by one of their own, Rear-Admiral Jerzy Swirski, from his new headquarters in London. Swirski escaped from Poland via Romania, a route taken by many of his countrymen. The Poles, while cooperating with the Royal Navy, acquired a reputation for skill and gallantry and participated in most of the major naval actions in the European Theatre of Operations. The Polish submarine *Orzeł*, during the German attack on Norway, sank the German troopship *Rio de Janeiro*. On April 10th, 1940, the *Orzeł* followed up this victory by sinking an armed German trawler in the Skaggerak. Shortly afterward, the *Orzeł* was lost. She sailed for a two-week patrol on May 23rd, 1940 and never returned. The destroyer *Grom* took part in the fighting at Narvik, where she was sunk by bombs from a German aircraft. The destroyer *Burza* helped evacuate British forces from Dunkirk and Calais during May and June 1940, and

went on to serve with distinction as a convoy escort and submarine hunter. The destroyer *Blyskawica* had a particularly distinguished career, participating in nearly every major sea action in the European Theatre, including the intervention in Norway, the evacuation at Dunkirk, escort duty on the dangerous Malta run, and the Normandy invasion.⁴ The Polish Navy in exile grew through the addition of Allied vessels; major units included six British destroyers and one that had belonged to France, as well as three British submarines and an American one. The Royal Navy also lent the Poles two light cruisers, one, *Dragon*, was sunk by a small German submarine during the Normandy invasion. In all, Polish naval vessels conducted 1162 wartime patrols. (Baginski, 1942a:102-103; Robinson, 1942:1684-1686; Roskill, 1954:69-70; Aronson, 1958:18-30; Flisowski, 1991:66-72; Peszke, 1999:171, 185-187)

The Germans intended for their naval war against Poland to be a short conflict and the German navy had orders to crush the meagre Polish forces in the opening days of the war. The foresight of Admiral Swirski with his decision to send Poland's three most modern destroyers to Great Britain prior to the outbreak of hostilities, enabled the most valuable units of Poland's navy to carry-on the fight against Germany. The bravery and resourcefulness of the crews of the submarines *Orzeł* and *Wilk*, and their escape to Britain, also help Poland continue its war. The German navy succeeded in its task of securing the Baltic, but it failed to destroy the vessels of the Polish Navy, as well as its fighting spirit.

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¹ For British and French abandonment see Donald Stoker, 2003. *Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic, 1919-1939: Grand Strategy and Failure*. London: Frank Cass.

² I am indebted to Janina Jadrych for translating this letter.

³ The sources disagree on the sinking dates. For example, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1921-1946*. London: Conway's Maritime Press, 1980:349 gives a date of September 6th, 1939 for the sinking of *General Haller*.

⁴ *Błyskawica* is now a museum ship in Gdynia.