

The Polish border town of Włocławek bombed by the Germans on September 1, 1939



Stauffenberg in Włocławek

The view of the bombed Włocławek led to the following confession of Claus von Stauffenberg, the future national hero of the new (?) Germany: “The [Włocławek] population is an incredible mob, so many Jews and crossbreeds. It is a people who feel good only under a whip. Thousands of prisoners of war will serve us well in agricultural works” (from a letter to his wife). A Polish journalist described his

impressions from his visit to Stuttgart, near which Stauffenberg was born:

“Anyone who takes the trouble to visit the Stauffenberg Memorial Chamber in Stuttgart can see an album with photographs from the 1939 campaign by Klaus Werner Reerink, a friend of Stauffenberg’s from the same unit. The Polish viewer must be disturbed by the picture taken in the apartment in the destroyed by bombs Włocławek, with the corpse of a dead

Polish victim looking with the blind eyes in camera’s lens in the foreground. It is difficult to think calmly about officers who consider such photographs as an interesting souvenir.”

Every year on July 20, in memory of the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Hitler, for which Stauffenberg paid with his life, the Bundeswehr recruits take an oath in Berlin. The assassins had a military goal – to end the war in the West after the Führer’s death, and to move all their forces to the East. They also clearly set their political goals – maintain power and restore the eastern border of the Reich to what it was in 1914. Independent Poland was not included in their plans.

Józef Galwina, a Polish military bishop, unable to find understanding in the Roman curia at the beginning of the war, asked the Pope:

“Is it possible to distinguish between a soldier and a woman, between shepherds and the army, at the altitude of 500 meters?”
“Yes, it is.”

“Therefore, German pilots who bomb women and shepherds should be punished individually for their crimes. Our moral theology (...) passes on (...) the responsibility, and thus the consequences to the commanders. Meanwhile, there are too many individual crimes going on, the punishing of which is only just and right.”

We know that those – the most common – war crimes did not find their finale

after the war before the Nuremberg Tribunal, which tried only selected officials and only for crimes ‘against humanity’. The Russians, like their former German accomplices, never had such scruples, as well as the Western allies made the Germans and the Japanese taste their own medicine. For all of them, what counted the most was to end their planned campaigns through the incineration of entire cities and towns, starting from Włocławek full of the Mischlings to Nagasaki, the capital of Japanese Christians. In 1943, Leonia Jablonkówna, a Polish writer of Jewish origin, published her most Christian poem, The Prayer, in the underground press:

*For the grave that shines like a temptation
For those who get weaker in the martyr’s days
Lord, save women and children
From the burning fires of Hamburg.*

*For the cross blasphemed in the chapels
For the wrongs done to the cemetery ashes
Preserve towering Gothic churches
In the enemy’s capitals.*

[transl. Barbava Wierczyńska]

However, it was a voice that was both exaggerated (“cut your coat according to your cloth”) and – isolated. ■

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that tactics (some had been with him in Spain) or be baptized in combat in the battle of Włocławek. They wanted to test the latest model of the diving bomber, the Junkers. The intelligence data indicating that a cavalry brigade was to be deployed in Włocławek, and that the enemy’s headquarters were located in the eastern part of the town, were the pretext to attack Włocławek.

Captain Walther Siegel’s squadron, which was a part of the German 4th Air Fleet, was assigned to conduct the first air raid under Operation Ostmarkflug, i.e. the air attack on Poland. The second attack on Włocławek was carried out by Captain Friedrich-Karl von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels’ squadron; the third one was carried out by Major Oskar Dinort, a well-known pre-war sports pilot. Worth mentioning is the fact that one of other pilots in this air raid was Horst Scholle, a German graduate of the junior high school in Włocławek.

Twenty-nine Junkers led by Captain Siegel appeared over Włocławek on September 1, 1939, at 4:35 a.m., and from the altitude of two thousand meters, dived flew on to the defenseless town. The raid had occurred ten minutes before the German Schleswig-Holstein battleship started firing at the Polish guard on Westerplatte located in the Free City of Danzig. Today, some historians believe that Second World War began in the sky of Włocławek, and not on a fragment of the Polish Baltic coastline.

The first bombs fell on the All Saints Hospital, clearly marked – as witnesses recall – with the symbols of the Red Cross. Thirty-two people died in that attack. The head of the hospital, Zygmunt Patryn, recalled, “I ran into the building, the southeastern part of which was in ruins. There, a nurse sister came running to

me from the infectious diseases building, with her hand partially torn off. I ran to the obstetrician’s building, which was also collapsed. Returning to the main building, I came across the corpse of two dead people. The operating and dressing rooms were in ruins. I ordered the sisters to tear their underwear and dress the wounded. We put mothers and newborns on the wagons, and sent them to Sieradz. The midwife took two births in the hospital park.”

The second air raid – on the eastern part of the town – took place half an hour later. During the third raid, the hospital was attacked again. All in all, the Germans, methodically, not disturbed by anyone, dropped 112 50-kg demolition bombs and 29 heaviest incendiary bombs, weighing half a ton each. At the same time, they performed diving flight for the first time in combat conditions. Apart from the hospital, they pulverized the parish church, the synagogue and the historic buildings of the Old Town.

It was estimated that 75 percent of the town buildings was demolished, and the loss of human life was estimated at about 1,200 people. None of the perpetrators was held responsible for the death of civilians and the destruction of the town that was completely devoid of military significance. Lieutenant Colonel Walter Siegel died in 1944; Major von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels died in 1940. Major Oskar Dinort, who, after the attack on Włocławek, boasted in the German press that he had dropped the last bomb directly on the market square, was decorated with the Knight’s Cross as an air ace. After the war, he settled in Cologne and died in 1965. ■

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“Westerplatte still fights on”

The Poles lost that first battle of World War II. However, even before the guns’ clattering faded, the history of their resistance became legendary.

The Defense of Westerplatte shows the Polish soldiers’ great determination in combat and their sense of duty despite their fading hope. However, this operation is also an example of good organization, which allowed them to resist the attack of a much stronger enemy for a long time.

Captain Franciszek Dąbrowski, Deputy Commander of the Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte, wrote down: “A new blaze of fire and iron falls on us at daybreak. The artillery fire is harassing; it keeps longer on the barracks. The cannonade begins at 7.00 in the morning. The attack now is cautious, and of a reconnaissance nature. The Germans test our possibilities of defense. Next, there was a relative lull.”

The attack goes on and off for the following, almost seven, days. The blaze of cannons, the bang of explosions, the clouds of dust covering everything and everyone, the creeping tongues of fire here and there, the cries of the wounded. And then – silence that foreshadows yet another calamity. Hope and doubt, extreme exhaustion, but also a sense

of duty smoldering in their heads that makes them pull themselves together, and once again stand up and fight. Poland was drowning in a wartime inferno. The Polish radio broadcast another message, “Westerplatte still fights on!”

In an old photograph, a soldier, stretched out like a string, looks straight into the camera lens. Behind his back, you can see a boarded-up gate, next to a white eagle with a crown and an inscription: “Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte”. It is the winter of 1926, and the soldier belongs to the first Polish guard unit on the peninsula. With his colleagues, he guards a 60-hectare piece of land about which the reborn Republic of Poland has great hopes.

Six years earlier, our country had gained access to the sea. However, the 140-kilometer stretch of coastline lacked a real port. The Poles were dependent on the marina in the German-dominated Free City of Danzig [Gdańsk]. After numerous operations in 1924, the League of Nations decided to grant the Republic of Poland an area at the mouth of the Dead Vistula River to