



A Polish guard at the gate of the Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte in the Free City of Danzig (1926)

the Gulf of Gdansk. A depot that would facilitate the reloading of weapons and ammunition was to be built there. The League agreed that the facility should be guarded by a unit of maximum 88 soldiers; however, they could not wield heavy weapons. Along with the expansion of the new Polish port of Gdynia, the military importance of the depot diminished. The Polish army's presence on Westerplatte, however, retained its prestigious character. "It emphasized the Polish rights to Gdańsk and Polish presence in this part of the Baltic coast," recalled the Polish historian Jan Szkułciński in an interview for the *polska-zbrojna.pl* portal.

Don't Be Taken by Surprise!

Soldiers from Westerplatte were aware that they were a Polish bridgehead in an increasingly hostile territory. In the first half of the 1930s, the Ministry of Military Affairs prepared a plan for them in the event of a German coup in the Free City of Danzig. If the Germans had captured the city and hit the depot, the post would have to defend itself – up to twelve hours at the most. Then the military relief should come by land or sea. However, in the summer of 1939, it was already clear that the Germans did not intend to limit themselves to Gdańsk. They wanted a great war. Westerplatte had to get ready for it.

The crew of the depot was secretly reinforced to the state of just over 200 soldiers. It also received more weapons, including a 76.2-mm gun, two 37-mm anti-tank guns, and nearly 20 heavy machine guns. Under the cover of night, the Polish crew built additional entanglements and fortifications, and cut down trees that could hinder fire. Before the war, the fortifications of Westerplatte consisted of modern barracks surrounded by a system of five concrete guardhouses with the so-called outposts in the foreground. There was also an anti-tank barrage, rows of entanglements and so-called stumbling blocks against infantry; fortifications made of wood and soil. On August 31, Major Henryk Sucharski, who commanded the depot, was to hear from Lieutenant Colonel Wincenty Sobociński, Head of the Military Department of the Polish General Commissariat in the Free City of Danzig, that the next day Germans were to attack, and he must not be caught off guard. It is said that the Major also learned that he should expect no relief.



Westerplatte sign shot through by the Germans. On the photo: the 2nd Battalion of the 18th Infantry Regiment Museum Group of Historical Reconstruction, active from 1998 in Sochaczew with Jakub Wojewoda as a leader



Capt Franciszek Dąbrowski at the briefing of the officer and non-commissioned personnel of the Westerplatte Military Transit Depot (1939)

Was this the case in fact? It is difficult to tell as we do not know the exact course of that conversation. There is, however, one thing that is certain: the Polish watchtower on Westerplatte was vigilant and ready to fight back. It didn't let the Germans catch it by surprise!

Poles Resist First Attacks

The Schleswig-Holstein battleship stands in the harbor canal. It faces Westerplatte with its side, and clouds of black smoke hover over its powerful cannons. It has just started firing. This is one of the most famous photographs from September 1939. It documents the moment of transition between silence and noise, peace and war, the old and the new world. A moment that changed almost everything in the history of Europe.

At the same time, this yellowed picture does not actually convey anything. In fact, can a paper picture tell the story of the 330-kg bullet whizzing through the silence of the morning air and of the powerful explosion tearing up tons of earth, steel

and concrete? Can it show the bustle of soldiers, express the snoring sound of hasty commands? Can it tell us what was going on right next door, on a piece of enemy-surrounded land that had fallen under the hurricane artillery fire?

The Germans attacked at 4.48 in the morning. First, there was the ring of eleven guns of the Schleswig-Holstein that at the end of August came to Gdańsk under the pretense of a courtesy visit. In total, on that day, the battleship's guns "spoke" three times – for seven, thirty seven, and twenty six minutes. Only during the first strike, a few hundred missiles of various caliber were fired at Westerplatte.

When the firing from the battleship ceased, special troops of German marines and SS Heimwehr Danzig set off to attack from the land – in total, about 200 soldiers. The assault was directed at the "Prom" outpost. Yet, the Poles managed to stop it. The operators of the largest Polish gun on Westerplatte destroyed several nests of German heavy machine guns. The Germans withdrew after an hour and a half.

They attacked again before noon. First, Schleswig-Holstein started shooting again, then the infantry moved on. The defenders lost the 76.2-mm gun, which made it easier for the Germans to fire at the depot from the buildings in Nowy Port. Moreover, Lieutenant Leon Pająk, who successfully commanded the "Prom" outpost, was seriously injured; but the Poles again repulsed the attack. The second German strike came to a halt at 12.30 p.m.

On the Polish side, the first-day fight losses balance account was four dead and ten wounded. The Germans lost forty soldiers, and tens were incapable of further fighting. At the same time, they were strongly surprised by such strong Polish resistance. The defenders of the depot showed that they were well prepared, and extremely determined to fight.

Air Raid Didn't Break Them

The real hell was about to begin, though. The Germans assumed that they would take Westerplatte in stride. That is why the first day of Polish resistance surprised them so much. They had to cool down after it, and reach for completely different means. They called on the Luftwaffe for support. The first of the 58 Junkers started to arrive over the Polish depot at 6 p.m. The next few dozen minutes cannot be described in any cool way. Suffice it to say that in that time on a piece of land of the width from 200 to 500 meters the aircraft dropped 26.5 tons of bombs! One of them, weighing half a ton, completely smashed guardhouse number 5, killing seven and seriously wounding two more Polish soldiers. Other bombs damaged the barracks, destroyed the mortars, and broken telephone communications. The air raid was to finally break the morale of the defenders. The Germans were so convinced of their victory that they did not plan another attack.

The events that took place on Westerplatte after that air attack are still concealed in a veil of mystery. It is said that a white flag flew over the barracks for a moment, but it was quickly torn off. It is said that the commander of the depot, Major Sucharski, suffered such a strong shock that his deputy, Captain Dąbrowski, had to take over the command of the facility. It is said that there was a fierce conflict between the officers, which reached its peak after the air raid. In this tangle of facts and speculations one fact is certain: the Poles still defended Westerplatte.

Order Has Been Carried Out

For the following days, the German infantry conducted reconnaissance by fighting. Its short excursions were to check the defenders' vigilance, make them tired, and stifle them. The Poles were being shot at from mortars and field guns, from deck cannons of the battleship and machine guns set up on the buildings behind the port canal. On September 4, the bullets that came from the Gulf of Gdańsk fell on the peninsula. They were fired from a 100-millimeter cannon of the T-196 torpedo boat and from the Von der Groeben minesweeper. On September 6, the Germans made two attempts to set fire to the forest that covered