The Polish Campaign, September 1939

Poland, in refusing to compromise its sovereignty through territorial concessions to Germany in the hopes of avoiding war, was the first country to mount an armed resistance to the Nazis.

Germany’s rapid defeat of Poland, which set off World War II on September 1, 1939, was the result of many factors, including the Germans’ vastly superior air force, their far better-equipped ground forces, and their training for the next generation of warfare, which featured rapid infantry advances spearheaded by tanks, in stark contrast to the static trench warfare of World War I. The final factor in Poland’s rapid defeat was the Red Army's unexpected invasion of eastern Poland on September 17. The unprepared Polish army, forced on the defensive, fought on for five weeks, until October 6, when the last major Polish units surrendered to the Germans and Soviets. That September campaign resulted in 3,000 casualties to the Red Army, 50,000 German casualties, with the Poles suffering more than 200,000 killed and wounded. The Nazis imprisoned 600,000 Polish soldiers; 200,000 were taken prisoner by the Soviets. Polish civilian dead and wounded exceeded even those of the army.

Massive air and artillery attacks characterized the three-week siege of Poland's capital city, Warsaw, resulting in 40,000 civilian casualties. The tactics first tested by the Luftwaffe on civilians at Guernica were only a prelude to the horrors of World War II, which ultimately would claim the lives of more than 800,000 of Warsaw's citizens and leave the city in ruins.