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Roger Moorhouse. ***Poland 1939: The Outbreak of World War II.*** New York: Basic Books, 2020. ISBN: 9780465095384 (hardcover, $32.00).

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Roger Moorhouse's *Poland 1939: The Outbreak of World War II* is a vividly evocative and fluidly written account of the invasion that marked the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. Like Moorhouse's other works (such as *Killing Hitler*, about the assassination attempts on Hitler's life),[1] *Poland 1939* is aimed at educated general readers, and it seems to have found a wide and receptive audience among them, to judge by the hundreds of favorable readers' reviews on websites like Amazon.com and Goodreads. The book's success has no doubt been helped by favorable reviews in publication such as the *New York Times* and *The Telegraph*, and its shortlisting for the Royal United Services Institute's Duke of Wellington Medal for Military History. *That Poland 1939* will raise awareness outside of Poland of the brutality and viciousness of Nazi Germany's invasion, as well as the fierce resistance mounted by the Polish armed forces, is to be welcomed. But *Poland 1939*, while succeeding in dispelling some myths, unfortunately reinforces others at the same time.

Poland 1939 is driven forward by two intertwined, but nonetheless distinct narratives—one charting the flurry of diplomatic activity that accompanied the outbreak of the war, the other chronicling the course of the invasion itself. A key theme of the first narrative is the failure of France and Great Britain to live up to their commitments to aid Poland in the event of an attack. Of the two, Moorhouse seems to find the behavior of the British more reprehensible. He shows that when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the British government offered a guarantee of security to Poland in 1939, they do not seem to have seriously thought they would have to act on it. Instead, it was an exercise in what might be called coercive diplomacy—hoping the threat of force would be enough to deter German aggression and settle things down. Unfortunately, the Germans called their bluff. Of course, no help was forthcoming for Poland, because Britain was not prepared to go to war, which the British government had well known. That can perhaps be forgiven as part of a risky but reasonable gamble, but Moorhouse quite damningly shows that the British establishment was not particularly concerned about its inability to help its ally and had more or less written Poland off as lost from the time the first German troops crossed the frontier.

Moorhouse is not quite as hard on the French government, which does not seem fair. To be sure, he does not let it off the hook, demonstrating that France, for many reasons, lacked the will to go to war with Germany. But the French failure was much worse than Britain's. France had a long-standing formal alliance with Poland, dating back to 1921; had held military conferences between top-level commanders; had the largest army in Europe after the Soviet Union; and, most obviously, was better placed than Britain to respond immediately to German aggression. Yet, aside from a half-hearted incursion into the Saarland, France did not act when Germany went to war. Moorhouse's account of the September 12 meeting of the Supreme War council, where Chamberlain, French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and senior military commanders collectively shrugged off with little sense of the scale of the betrayal they were committing. Quoting historian Anita Prazmowska, he notes that the conference was "a veritable orgy of mutual congratulation at not having succumbed to the

[1] Roger Moorhouse, *Killing Hitler: The Plots, the Assassins, and the Dictator Who Cheated Death* (New York: Bantam, 2007).

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temptation of attacking Germany" (153). Franco-British shirking of their commitments to Poland had devastating consequences, and not only for that country. Not only was Poland's military strategy built entirely around the idea that the allies would immediately come to its aid; the Nazi regime could almost certainly not have survived a full-scale incursion by the French while it was still engaged in operations in Poland.

Those operations themselves are the subject of the second narrative thread. Moorhouse is a fine writer of military history, and he grippingly chronicles the maneuvers and battles (against both the Germans and the Soviets) that raged from the 'Polish Corridor' to Lwow. These sections of the book are particularly focused on dispelling myths. Most importantly, Moorhouse wants to crush the lingering perception that the Germans simply steamrollered over a bungling, backward, manifestly inferior enemy. In this he succeeds. The Poles, he shows, fought hard and well (the initial German attack on Westerplatte, for example, was actually a failure, and ended up dragging on for days and costing the Germans quite a few casualties. The first ground assault on the Polish positions, for example, which immediately followed a heavy bombardment by the battleship *Schleswig-Holstein*, completely failed and cost the German invaders 13 dead and 58 wounded; a second ground assault mounted shortly thereafter also failed and resulted in the death of the ground forces' commanding officer. In comparison, only two Polish soldiers were killed in that first day of fighting (13-16). Ultimately, however, he argues that Poland was doomed by the fact that it simply did not have the economic means needed to build an army that was mechanized to the degree that Germany's was. Moorhouse also addresses the lingering myth, created largely by German propaganda, that Polish cavalrymen charged German tanks with their horses. Moorhouse notes that all armies still had a cavalry arm in 1939, though Poland's was larger than most and had retained more of its traditional prestige. According to the reigning doctrine in 1939, Polish cavalry were meant to fight as mobile infantry, rapidly maneuvering before getting of their horses to engage enemy soldiers. This was not entirely unreasonable, given that most German soldiers in 1939, as most soldiers everywhere at that time, still got where they were going as Napoleon's and Caesar's did: by walking. And in fact, there were instances when cavalry attacks against infantry were successful. However, the Polish cavalry, like the Polish infantry, proved unable to withstand not only Germany's tanks, but also the coordinated artillery and air support that would eventually become the heart of 'Blitzkrieg.'

Moorhouse makes excellent use of sources, both published (such as the memoirs of soldiers and commanders) and archival (such eyewitness accounts of civilians preserved in Polish and British archives). He is very good at blending, in nearly every paragraph, a 'macro' view with perceptions of those caught up in the events unfolding at the highest diplomatic and military levels. Describing, for example, the German drive on Warsaw, he provides firsthand testimony from a Polish general, describing what it was like to be driven back by the Germans while trying to shelter in the Kampinos forest. "I have never been through anything like that," he noted. "It's a nightmare. Hundreds killed and wounded, incessant fire, panic-stricken troops running in all directions without a purpose, always under enemy bombs. I don't know how I got out of that hell." (184) In another, exceptionally well-chosen juxtaposition, Moorhouse notes that not long after Chamberlain bluntly told the U.S. ambassador that nothing could be done for Poland, a ten-year-old Polish girl was writing in her diary that

> I shall have to learn English because I know only one word 'Goodbye,' and that's hardly enough to carry on a conversation with English soldiers. Papa said that in three or four weeks they'll be here. When they come, I should like to thank them for helping us to beat Hitler but if I haven't learnt sufficient English to say so, I'll just have to hug them and they'll know what I mean" (101).

Occasionally, however, the quoted material is not as effective. When Moorhouse describes the Germans closing in on Warsaw, he quotes a diarist who noted that "The Germans are attempting to surround Warsaw." After all of the exceptionally powerful quotations, ones such as this land with a thud (182).

Moorhouse's book places strong emphasis on the nature of the brutalities inflicted on Poland in 1939, particularly by the Nazis. He provides harrowing descriptions of, for example, the vicious treatment meted out by guards upon new arrivals to the concentration camp at Stutthof set up at the very beginning of the invasion; of a Varsovian woman who could only listen on in despair and horror as the city's German conquerers dragged her husband out of their apartment and shot him; of Polish civilians and military prisoners being executed by firing squad; of the creation of special SS units to roam around and exterminate those the Nazis saw as a threat to its new order, including Polish intellectuals. Driving much or all of this

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Moorhouse argues (correctly, in my view) was the Nazi view of the Poles as an inferior race, not worthy of the restraints that might be placed on conduct towards those deemed high up the racial hierarchy.

While Moorhouse ably documents what might be called the 'ugly underbelly' of the conventional conflict, certain topics are sanitized. *Poland 1939* is written in the heroic mode, and the book is full of stories of Polish bravery and gallantry.[2] This is fair enough as far as it goes, but this idealized vision leads to some distortions or omissions. An important one is the nature of the atrocities that occurred in the so-called Polish corridor. What is not in dispute is that in 1939, Polish civilians and the Polish army killed German civilians, and the German army killed Polish civilians. Nonetheless, many of the specifics of these atrocities—how and when they were sparked, for example—is a matter of much debate and uncertainty. In the book's depiction of these events, when the Polish army entered the homes and apartments of German civilians and then dragged them off to be shot, they were justly punishing scheming, traitorous German civilians who had launched a partisan war behind the lines. No doubt some Polish-German civilians were guilty of this; but not all of them, and Moorhouse's presentation of these events borders on propaganda.

Another important omission concerns Poland's Jews. Moorhouse notes that when the Soviets invaded Poland from the east on September 17, they were, in some places, welcomed by the Jews. This is an explosive topic: accusations of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' were used to justify atrocities against innocent Jews by Poles just as by Nazis. In addition, aside from one very brief mention, Moorhouse does not explain that interwar Poland was a hotbed of virulent anti-semitism, as Paul Brykczynski has illustrated in his prizewinning book *Primed for Violence*.[3] Indeed, the distinguished historian of Central Europe William Hagen has gone as far as to provocatively argue that the Poles in the 1930s were well on the way to committing their own Holocaust. A better sense of this context might provide some explanation for why some Jews were not unhappy to see the Red army arrive.

These are rather serious reservations. Nonetheless, if more readers outside of Poland learn about what happened there in 1939, this book will have served a useful purpose. I will almost certainly assign it to my undergraduate students, although with a lengthy list of caveats.

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[2] In this it is reminiscent of the work of Norman Davies, the British historian noted for his intense emotional attachment to Poland and its history. Among his many publications is the two volume *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), which, for many years, was the indispensable English-language survey of Polish history. This family resemblance is not surprising, since Moorhouse collaborated on and co-authored a book with him *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).

[3] Paul Brykczynski, *Primed for Violence: Murder, Antisemitism, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Poland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

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