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Review of *Case White: the Invasion of Poland, 1939* by Robert Forczyk & *First to Fight: The Polish War, 1939* by Roger Moorhouse

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The book is largely about the immediate few post-war years and some readers might query where is consideration of the later 1920s and 1930s, but the absence of much detail on those years in most chapters might point to the extent to which veterans are less easy to identify as veterans once they settled into civilian life. While the cover price will put off some possible buyers, this book should be a key acquisition for many university libraries since its chapters speak to an extremely broad range of historical fields dealing with inter-war Britain. All the chapters are important enough to find places on many course reading lists dealing with issues such as gender and party politics, which might not immediately concern themselves with First World War veterans, in addition to those more directly concerned with the post-military lives of veterans.

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**Robert Forczyk, *Case White: The Invasion of Poland, 1939*. Oxford: Osprey, 2019. 416pp. ISBN 978-1472834959 (hardback). Price £25.00.**

**Roger Moorhouse, *First to Fight: the Polish War, 1939*. London: Vintage, 2019. 342pp. ISBN 978-1784706241 (paperback). Price £9.99.**

There are episodes of the Second World War that are well known, there are episodes of the Second World War that could be better known and there are episodes of the Second World War that are barely known at all. Of the latter, one such is the German invasion of Poland in 1939. Short though this struggle was, this was a bitter affair that cost the lives of 250,000 Poles, devastated many towns and cities and resulted in the partition of the country between its two most bitter enemies, and yet details on exactly what occurred are hard to come by. The terrible atrocities committed by the Germans against the hapless Jewish community have been well documented by historians such as Martin Gilbert. However, beyond that there is almost nothing other than a small number of accounts drawn almost entirely from the German point of view. To make matters worse, meanwhile this last does so through the medium of Nazi propaganda: in general history after general history, we hear of little more than Polish cavalry charging German tanks and the Luftwaffe wiping out the entire Polish air force on the ground on the first day of the war, and yet both these claims owe

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their existence to Josef Goebbels and his acolytes. Want of Polish, and want of access to the Polish archives contributed very heavily to this situation, but, even so, on show was also much want of enterprise: when the major television documentary, 'The World at War', was screened in the early 1970's, for example, the hundreds of eye-witnesses interviewed for the production included not a single Pole, despite the fact that there was a substantial Polish community in Britain that would have been all too willing to tell its story. All this being the case, it is a matter of enormous delight that the past few months have seen the publication of not one but two scholarly accounts of the campaign.

In so far as the general thrust of the two works referred to, Robert Forczyk's *Case White* and Roger Moorhouse's *First to Fight*, is concerned, it is very similar, indeed, all but identical, and their arguments will in consequence be dealt with under a single heading. However, almost entirely limited to matters of approach and emphasis though they are, such differences as they exhibit are far from unimportant. Thus, on the one hand, Forczyk's account is essentially an operational narrative, whilst on the other Moorhouse's is wider ranging and includes much more in the way of human interest, containing, as it does, the writings and reminiscences of a much greater number of eye-witnesses. Yet with neither approach is there anything wrong, while the author's differing choices ensure that the two works complement each other very nicely rather than engaging in sterile competition.

Let us proceed, then, to the argument which Forczyk and Moorhouse both advance. This is, of necessity, one that is very sombre. In brief, the creation of the Versailles Treaty, inter-war Poland was gifted from the start with a large, and potentially very hostile, German community, while it arguably made matters infinitely worse for itself by seizing large swathes of White Russia - modern-day Belarus - in the Russo-Polish War of 1918-1920. As if this was not enough, the frontiers of the new state were all but indefensible, Poland being wide open to assault from east and west alike, while Warsaw's only potential allies - Britain, France, Czechoslovakia and Romania - were either unable or unwilling to offer much in the way of assistance. To geographical and strategic weakness, meanwhile, was added poverty: possessed though they were of a substantial industrial base, the Poles simply could not equip their armed forces with enough modern armaments (which is not to say that they did not make considerable progress, especially in the field of anti-tank weapons); whether more could have been done in this respect is a moot point, but it has to be said that, despite the conquest by Warsaw cryptologists of the secrets of the Enigma machine, here was also a failure of intelligence, the Polish high command failing to perceive the extent of the progress which the Germans were making with regard to speeding up the tempo of military operations.

From this last point it follows that at least some of the difficulties which were to confront the Poles were of their own making. We come here, in particular, to the malign influence of the founder of the Polish state, Josef Pilsudski. A Polish officer who during the First World War was allowed by the Austro-Hungarian authorities to form large numbers of the many Poles resident in the Habsburg empire into Polish Legions to fight the Russians and who from the beginning took control of the armed forces of the new state. Pilsudski gravely weakened Poland's chances by forcing the air force to dedicate much of its strength to close support of the army, thereby gravely dissipating its fighting power; emphasising a strategy based on a mobility in which the Poles were all but certain to be out matched; neglecting the creation of a system of permanent army corps; and packing the high command with cronies from his days in the Habsburg service. When war broke out, if it is unfair to criticise the Poles for deploying so many of their troops so far forward - if they were to get the British and French to intervene in the manner required, they could not afford to delay significant combat for fear that this might be interpreted as a want of fighting spirit – it is therefore clear that their resistance was likely to be badly compromised.

As Forczyk and Moorhouse make clear, in the campaign that followed the dubious legacy of the inter-war period was compounded by a series of errors committed by such trustees of Pilsudski as General Rommel (a cousin of the famous German commander) and Dab-Biernacki and the commander of the armed forces, Marshal Rydz-Smigly. Yet, given the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the subsequent Russian invasion of eastern Poland while the battle was still in full swing, in the end these error made little difference: the Poles might have taken that much longer to crush, but they would have been crushed anyway. Equally, if Britain and France did not live up to the promises they had made the Poles prior to the outbreak of war, even an all-out effort on their part, by means, for example, of an intensive bomber campaign against the Ruhr supported by a more vigorous incursion by the French army in the Rhineland, would not have saved Poland. Yet, for all that, the Poles in many instances fought with the utmost heroism and inflicted severe casualties on a German war-machine that was still distinctly lacking in some respects and badly handled in many others. As for the old faithfuls of the traditional version of events, cases of cavalry charging tanks there were none, while, far from being wiped out on the ground, the Polish air force remained in action in considerable strength until the Russian invasion deprived it of its last bases. It is an inspiring story exceptionally well-told, and one which all those interested, not just in the early years of the Second World War, but in the situation in Eastern Europe today, are urged to read.

The war in Poland is also worth looking at from another point of view, however. From the very beginning it was a conquest that was founded on and informed by racial hatred, and in this sense it acted as a pattern for the horrors that were to follow in the course of Operation Barbarossa. Until now, the chief victims of what occurred

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are portrayed as having been the Jews, and the latter came in for the most terrible treatment. Setting aside mere robbery, taunting and other acts of humiliation, every day saw appalling acts of murder and massacre, with large numbers of men, women and children shot to death or, still worse, burned alive locked up in blazing barns or synagogues. In Wieruszow, we hear of 21 deaths; in Czestochowa 180; in Bedzin 200; in Mielec 55; and in Pilica, 32. As for the total of those slaughtered in the course of fighting, a sensible estimate might be 3,000. What these works now present, however, is that the Jews were not alone. On the contrary, thanks to racial hatred, the paranoid fear of partisans that dated back to First-World-War Belgium and, before that, the Franco-Prussian War, many hundreds of Christians perished alongside them in the pogroms, the total number of fatalities being estimated by Moorhouse at some 16,000. To state this, of course, is not to minimise the Jewish tragedy, but rather to maximise the German guilt: though German soldiers leaving Berlin might have proclaimed that they were off to 'thrash the Jews', the reality was that they were the agents of a system that set no bounds on its victims, no bounds on its goals, and no bounds on its evils. If the Poles were the first to fight, they were also the first to fall.

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**Helen Fry, *The Walls Have Ears: the Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019. 31 plates. 2 illustrations. Xiv + 319pp. ISBN 978-0300238600 (hardback). Price £18.99.**

The official history of British intelligence in the Second World War made it clear that the three best sources of information available were signals intelligence, photo reconnaissance and prisoners of war. The first two have spawned a vast literature but the last far less. The official history severely excluded the human dimension from its account with prisoner of war intelligence referred to throughout simply as "POW". Helen Fry has helped to fill both these gaps with her study of one fascinating component of prisoner of war intelligence: how the private conversations of German prisoners of war were recorded secretly in an industrial-scale information gathering operation which ranked along with Bletchley Park in thoroughness and organisation. She has drawn on a huge trove of hitherto unexploited official papers and personal reminiscences of the small army of listeners recruited to man the operation to