

WESTERPLATTE – AUDIO #1

WORLD HERITAGE BATTLEFIELDS

Narrator: This program is brought to you by Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk as part of the World Battlefield Museums Forum.

[Music intro playing]

Narrator Welcome. Courage, Sacrifice, and Heritage are values crucial to understanding battlefields and reflecting on the fate of man and his historic struggles.

As places of remembrance and focal points to pay our respects, battlefields bring back images of the past we can explore and research.

Preserving and conserving battlegrounds, artefacts and infrastructure for future generations should be our major goal.

Only when this goal is achieved can we think of battlefields as open-air museums and commercial tourism destinations. After all, battlefields are guardians of memory, shaping our collective, historical identity.

[Music intro]

Narrator: Westerplatte - the place where the Second World War began became a symbol of the heroism and courage of Polish soldiers. But to understand its history, one must go back two decades, to the end of World War I.

[First World War canon fire]

Narrator: The Great War to end all wars was over. Cannons fell silent, winners and losers alike started to return to their homes, in a Europe that was completely changed. Three Imperial dynasties had collapsed. Old countries reappeared and new countries were established, full of hope for the future.

[Solemn music with drums playing]

Professor David Stevenson of the London School of Economics:

To the outbreak of World War I Poland is not an independent state. It has been partitioned at the end of 18th century. It's divided in three ways between the Russian Empire, Austria-Hungary and Germany. And all those three empires had common interest in keeping Poland down. Once they're at war with each other, the consensus breaks down and they start to engage in rivalry for Polish loyalties.

Poland is mentioned as an objective in British Prime Minister David Lloyd George's speech in London, called "Caxton Hall" speech in January 1918. Three days later Woodrow Wilson, American president, announces a so called "Fourteen Points" which is a peace plan. Poland also appears in the "Fourteen Points".

And then there's a joint statement called "The Versailles Declaration" in June 1918 and in that the three western governments, France, United States and United Kingdom, give their support for the principle of independent sovereign Poland at the end of World War I.

This includes a pledge to give Poland's secure access to the sea which becomes really important because it entails that in principle Poland should get control of the mouth of the river Vistula, including Gdansk.

There's a compromise at the peace conference that Gdansk and its area around it become Free City under the protection of the League of Nations with Poland having a substantial influence there, for example the Polish Post and control of the railway system. It's an accustomed union with Poland.

Poland gets a large share of economic control over Gdansk but the city is self-governing and autonomous and has the main German political parties represented there, including the Nazis.

[Calm background music with bells]

Narrator: As the war was drawing to its conclusion, Poles everywhere started to lobby for their cause - locally and among the emerging victorious powers, and in 1918 Poland was promised 'free access to the sea'.

Between 1919 and 1920 Mieczysław Jałowiecki, a Pole employed at the American Food Mission, and who later held the post of General Delegate of the Ministry of Provisions in Gdansk, was able to buy a number of buildings at the former holiday resort located at the edge of the port of Gdansk called Westerplatte.

This proved particularly valuable at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 when Poland negotiated its position.

The Versailles Treaty created a completely new situation, which meant that new institutions came into being in Gdansk.

A Municipal Government with legislative powers was created in Gdansk.

Poland was represented in the newly created free city, in a variety of ways, the rail system was operated by Poland and there was a separate Polish postal service.

Poland was also guaranteed independent military installations such as the Military Transit Depot which was located at Westerplatte.

Dr Karol Nawrocki, director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

In 1924 the League of Nations grants Poland Westerplatte peninsula for storage and shipment by rail of imported materiel. The storage is named Military Transit Depot at Westerplatte.

The first Polish guard unit arrives at Westerplatte in January 1926. The soldiers are carefully selected for the service at the Depot – a strategic tiny piece of Polish soil.

Soon the Depot is surrounded by a brick wall, new port infrastructure and warehouses are built.

From 1933 a construction of permanent fortifications begins – four guardhouses with concealed basements that contain machine guns, fortified posts in the NCOs' mess and in the purpose-built, modern, bomb-proof Barracks.

A network of field fortifications and outposts is built that surrounds the Barracks to form a highly effective, concealed network of defence lines.

[Tense music building up]

In the meantime, the tensions between Poland and Hitler's Germany escalate. War is imminent.

In the last days and hours before the outbreak of war, reinforcements are secretly smuggled into the Depot to bolster the numbers of defenders up to around 220 soldiers.

[Pre-war street sounds, market buzz, trams, horses]

Narrator: Life flowed back into the veins of Gdansk. The population mixed freely: Germans, Poles, Protestants, Jews and Catholics.

Wojciech Samól of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

The Gdansk Poles cultivated their national identity and traditions. They had their own churches, shops, schools, social, youth and sports organizations. On September the 1st, 1939, with the outbreak of war, this rich legacy was shattered to pieces.

[Atmospheric music]

In the early 1920s the port of Gdansk was capable of handling goods and was the only port capable of keeping Poland's economy going.

When the recession struck in the 1920s, the port of Gdansk suffered the economic brunt of the crisis. But despite the serious setback in the city's economy, many Polish businesses still operated out of Gdansk.

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[Atmospheric music]

Wojciech Samól:

The Polish population enjoyed certain rights in the Free City but the German authorities were subjecting them to an ever increasing range of repressive measures. They were mostly administrative in nature, such as obstacles to prevent education in Polish schools or a ban on using the Polish language in public institutions.

[Marching music with drums]

From 1930 onwards, legislation became increasingly harsh, significantly limiting employment opportunities for the Poles. *[Breaking glass heard]* Anti-Polish sentiment began to manifest itself more openly by the end of 1938. Repressions escalated, Polish businesses were boycotted, shops were vandalized by Nazi gangs, and acts of physical violence became the order of the day.

[Atmospheric music]

Narrator: As early as August 30th, 1939, arrests of individuals were made – their names had been put on lists compiled beforehand by the Nazis.

[wartime radio announcements from Polish Radio and the BBC announcing the start of hostilities]

[Atmospheric music]

On 1st September, 1939 at 4:48 am a German battleship launched an attack on the Military Transit Depot at Westerplatte. That same morning, the Polish Post Office in Gdansk, as well as offices of several other Polish organizations were also attacked. September alone saw the Germans arrest between fifteen hundred and four and a half thousand Poles in Gdansk.

They were moved to prisons and detention camps around Gdansk including Stutthof. Many were brutally beaten and subjected to torture. The German authorities also started the extermination of prominent Polish community members. On 5th October, 1939 thirty-eight defenders of the Polish Post Office, who had become prisoners of war, were executed by firing squad. Several months later, during two execution sprees in January and March 1940, close to the Stutthof concentration camp, eighty-

nine people were killed including father Franciszek Rogaczewski and Gdansk municipal government deputy, Antoni Lenzion. By 1945, at least 620 representatives of the pre-war Polish community in Gdansk had been murdered.

Dr Karol Nawrocki:

[Shooting, aircraft diving, sirens and bombing, canons firing]

On September 1, 1939 at 04:48 a.m. Schleswig-Holstein vessel fires first shots at Westerplatte. German sappers blow up the Westerplatte Depot's gate and launch an attack into the Depot from all sides. The Depot's station master, Sgt. Wojciech Najsarek, is gravely wounded and dies the following day.

In Guardhouse no. 3, a senior rifleman Konstanty Jezierski, is killed. He is probably the first soldier-victim of WWII.

The heavy shelling also destroys the infirmary and all medical equipment is lost. From that moment, the Depot's doctor, Major Mieczysław Słaby, performs miracles to treat the wounded.

Surprisingly, despite being outnumbered and outgunned, Poles inflict heavy losses on the attacking German units with deadly fire. The attackers are decimated.

Before noon the German attack breaks down. The Poles hold their positions. No heavy losses in manpower or equipment are suffered on the Polish side. The German losses are estimated at ca. 50-80 soldiers – killed or wounded.

[Bomber planes diving, air raid sirens sounding]

September 2, 1939

An Air raid of ca. 50 Stuka Ju-87 dive bombers destroys Guardhouse no. 5. At least 6 Polish soldiers die under the rubble. Polish soldiers, shell shocked and exhausted, hold their positions.

September 3, 1939

The Depot is still under constant German fire, while The Polish Radio and the press broadcast communiques of Westerplatte's heroic defence to bolster the fighting spirit of other Polish units fighting the Germans across the country.

September 4 and 5, 1939

Shelling of Westerplatte from the sea and the siege on land continues with constant fire.

September 6, 1939

Unable to take the Depot with regular infantry attacks, the Germans use the Depot's rail tracks to set it ablaze by rolling in tank cars filled with flammable liquid. The attempt fails as one car self-explodes and the others are destroyed with shots from Polish anti-tank gun.

September 7, 1939

From 04:30 a.m. the Germans begin preparatory bombardment of the Depot followed by more German reconnaissance patrols into the Depot.

At that time Guardhouse no. 2 is destroyed with a direct hit.

At around 10:00 a.m. – with the numbers of the wounded growing, totally exhausted from stress, lack of sleep, and constant shelling – Major Henryk Sucharski decides to surrender.

The battle of Westerplatte, the first armed clash of World War 2, is a symbol of true grit and unbreakable spirit of the Polish soldiers against overwhelming enemy force.

Narrator: The defenders of Westerplatte stood up to the massed German land, sea and air onslaught against all odds. They also believed reinforcements would soon be with them as we can hear from these authentic survivor comments.

Witness account

Memoirs of Captain Henryk Chrul from the "Łazienki" outpost, September 1st, 1939:

(...) To be honest, I was a little eager for the war to start. I hadn't been fully aware of its consequences. I thought that with help from France and England, Allied aircraft would fly back and forth across Germany and would quickly destroy it. (...) Every now and then we asked petty officer Bartoszak if he could see any of our own, or French, or British ships on the horizon. We were waiting for reinforcements from Gdynia to arrive; after all we were only supposed to hold on for between 2 and 12 hours (...)." Petty Officer Bartoszak spotted some battleship silhouettes on the horizon while looking out towards the Hel peninsula. We all thought that it had to be the French who were coming to help and that the Schleswig would soon be destroyed, but as he looked on, he told to us, greatly disheartened that the ships were German. I couldn't really believe it, but after a while I learned that it was true, especially as we felt shrapnel and grenades falling upon us from the arriving "guests".

Witness account

The ships of Commander Ruge were also supposedly spotted by corporal Stanislaw Trela from Guardhouse No. 1

[Atmospheric music]

(...) I went to look behind the guardhouse from the barracks' side. I looked in the direction of Gdynia and the Hel peninsula, and I noticed ships manoeuvring at sea. There were more than five of them. I was very pleased, because I thought they were English ships. Suddenly I saw flashes of guns from the ships. In a few seconds, shells flew over us and exploded in Neufahrwasser. I thought they were ours. (...) The fire was quickly adjusted and the shells started falling close to our munitions store near the railway tracks (...).

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Narrator: While Poland was fighting for its life, one of Poland's literary greats, Konstanty Idelfons Galczyński, wrote one of Poland's most famous poems even before the end of the German invasion of Poland – *The Soldiers of Westerplatte*

[Atmospheric music]

Konstanty Idelfons Galczyński *The Soldiers of Westerplatte* poem, translated by Jean Ward:

When the days were accomplished and the time came in Summer to perish, straight to heaven in fours they went soldiers of Westerplatte. (And summer that year was lovely). And thus they sighed and sang: No matter the wounds or pain, so purely sweet is it now to go to those heavenly glades. (And on earth that year there was so much heather for posies.) We stood in Gdansk firm as a wall scorning Squarehead salvos	amid the clouds we soar now all, soldiers of Westerplatte. And those whose eyes and ears are keen by all accounts could hear the drumming, even step above of the Marine Battalion. And such a song as this was heard: To take our fill of sunshine, on hot days we'll lie warming ourselves on the heavenly heathlands. But when the cold wind starts to blow and circles the world in sadness to Warsaw's heart we'll come floating down, soldiers of Westerplatte.
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Narrator: Even though the defence of Westerplatte was an important rallying cry for Poland at that time and has since been used as an important and well known symbol of Poland's resolve to fight, tragically, neither those who survived nor those who gave their lives there were treated with due respect, even after the war. It was only in 2016 that proper archaeological work was conducted at this famous and significant site.

Adam Dziewanowski, Archaeologist, Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

Work to excavate and research what was left after the battle in 1939 began in 2016. We collected nearly 40 000 objects. That's really a lot!

We found many rifle shells, pieces of Polish army uniforms and military equipment, as well as many personal and everyday items.

Thousands of bullet and bomb fragments scattered throughout the area just tell you how fierce the battle was. But the most interesting was yet to come...

Over the following eight weeks we were able to find and exhume the remains of nine fallen Polish soldiers. For 80 years the pits dug out by the prisoners became unnamed graves for the slain heroes of Westerplatte.

I remember we were all deeply moved, speechless. When the remains were found, the search for the closest living relatives began. We wanted to conduct a proper forensic research and compare the genetic material to identify the bodies.

Five of Polish soldiers have been identified. Identification notes were presented to family members by the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, at Westerplatte during anniversary celebrations on 1st September 2020.

We now believe that our priority is to give those fallen heroes a proper ceremonial burial at the Cemetery of the Polish Army at Westerplatte.

The cemetery will soon will soon undergo major restoration works. A lot of work is still ahead of Museum's archaeologists and we continue to believe that Westerplatte hides many secrets yet to be revealed.

Narrator : Dr Karol Nawrocki, director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk and founder member of the World Battlefield Forum.

Dr Karol Nawrocki: Today, Westerplatte has neither the aura nor the fortitude of a symbol. In the 21st century, at Westerplatte, the only means of historical education are spoken word, abandoned ruins, and chaotic sightseeing routes.

It is hard to believe that for decades such an iconic national remembrance site has not been properly developed as a full-scale memorial museum.

Despite war damage, communist transformations, and the negligence of the 1990s and of the first decade of the 21st century, the core symbolic value of Westerplatte is still there.

The development plans for a new Westerplatte and the War of 1939 Museum will make it possible to recreate landmarks of the heroic defence of the Poles in September 1939.

The return to the original layout of the Depot will provide a unique, yet natural opportunity to create an attractive historical and landscape park.

The new Museum will preserve and reveal historical, spatial, material and non-material substance. In addition, Westerplatte will become a centre for school and civic education.

With this approach to rebuild, reconstruct, and with focus on historical education and the value of Westerplatte's heritage, the new museum will immerse visitors in a tragic, yet glorious story of Westerplatte.

Above all, one task remains paramount. It is to give proper burial to the remains of Polish soldiers, heroic defenders, found at Westerplatte in 2019. Following forensic examination and their identification, these remains will be given a state funeral at the refurbished Polish Army War Cemetery on Westerplatte.

With a new full-scale of Westerplatte and the War of 1939 Museum visitors will be able to relive the story of Westerplatte and understand the unique heritage behind this symbol.

Narrator: Westerplatte is a heritage battlefield for a host of reasons. The courage and tenacity of the soldiers to go beyond the call of duty. The way their sacrifice was acknowledged yet the fighters remained forgotten for another 80 years, honoured only at times of official commemorations at Westerplatte.

With the new Westerplatte and War of 1939 Museum, the heritage of this unique landmark will be preserved for generations. It is also where the bloodiest conflict in the history of mankind started. There are lessons for us all to learn from Westerplatte.

And this is the true significance of the Westerplatte World Heritage battle-site today. For whoever is unaware of history is doomed to repeat it.