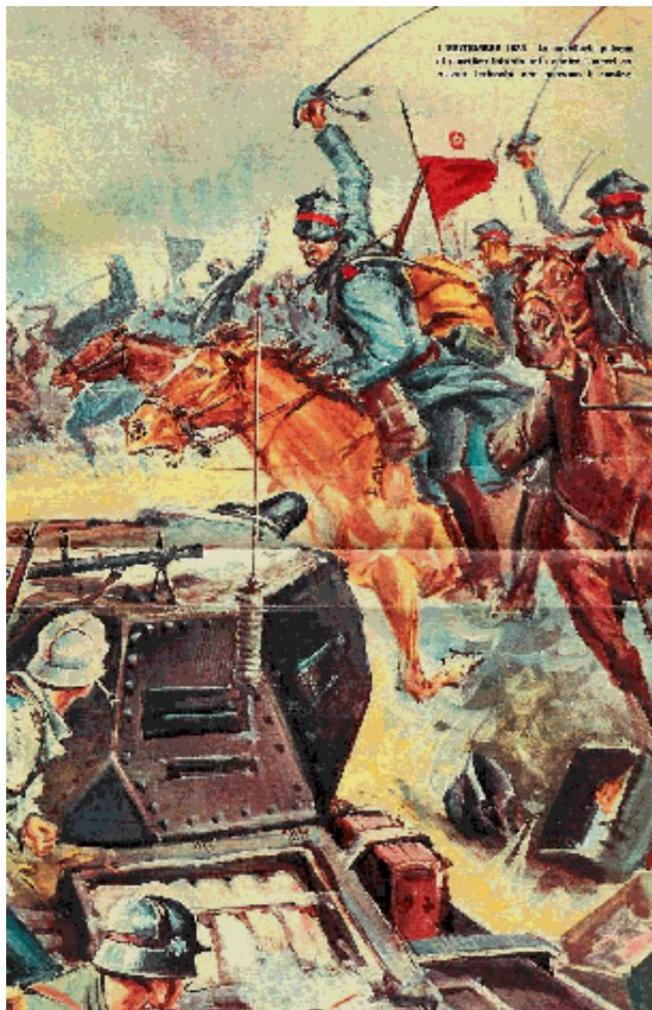


Polish Cavalry in World War II

Glimpses of myths and realities



Introduction

One of the myths of the Second World War is the image of Polish cavalry, sabers drawn and/or lances down, galloping towards German armored units - to suffer an inevitable fate. But is this impression now also consistent with what actually happened?

This article discusses how the myth arose, and at the same time is the framework for the following accounts that shed light on the Polish cavalry's participation in the Second World War:

1. The last great attack of the Polish cavalry.
2. About Polish cavalry in 1939.
3. Forward! After me! The absolute last Polish cavalry attack.
4. About Polish cavalry on the Russian side.
5. Map material.
6. A resume in English.

Further information on the subject is received with great interest.

The first attack of the Polish cavalry

The foundation for the myth was already laid on the first day of the war - 1 September 1939:

18th Lancer Regiment of the Cavalry Brigade "Pomorska" attacked units of the 20th Motorized Division, which were in column under march east towards the town of Chojnice (about 100 kilometers southwest of Danzig (present-day Gdansk). To cover the withdrawal of Polish infantry units, the 18th Lancer Regiment got order to attack. The regimental commander, Colonel Mastalerz, decided on a mounted attack.

The regimental adjutant, Captain Godlewski, asked his commander if it would not be more prudent to attack the retreat, but the colonel replied: "Young man! I am quite clear about what it means to carry out an impossible order!"

Earlier in the afternoon there had been minor skirmishes between the Polish horsemen and the head of the German column. At 17:00 the attack begins - the first cavalry charge of the war - when Major Malecki draws his saber.

From starting positions in a piece of wood, the 1st Squadron, followed by the 2nd Squadron - a total of about 250 men - attacked the German column. The 3rd and 4th Squadron regiments were positioned a little further back, ready to intervene. The terrain between the forest and the country road was flat ground, without hiding or cover.

The drawn sabers glinted in the sun as the squadrons galloped forward. Shooting from the road results in casualties and the first dead and wounded fall from their horses. The momentum of the attack is maintained and the surprised German infantrymen seek to retreat. Suddenly a German column of tanks, armored cars and motorized infantry appears!

In the lead, the advancing horsemen do not notice this threat, but the German armored vehicles immediately engage the attackers under fire. Even before the riders can turn their horses, the slaughterhouse is in full swing.

Wild confusion! Horses crash or run wild, dragging their riders behind them, hanging by the stirrups.

Everywhere there are dead and wounded and runaway horses without riders. Distant trumpet calls mingle with the groans of the wounded.

Captain Swiesciak, who led the attack, falls. Colonel Mastalerz also falls when he, together with a couple of horsemen, tries to come to the captain's rescue. In an instant, over half of the riders are incapacitated... and thus the myth was born! Horsemen with drawn sabers in hopeless battle against battle and armored vehicles!

However, it must be added that, from the Polish side, it was neither a suicide attack nor a deliberate attack against armored vehicles. When the colonel gave his order he did not expect German armor to appear. When the hood appeared it was a total surprise and too late to react.

Other matches

Until October 10, 1939, when the last regular Polish cavalry units surrendered, there are numerous examples of the cavalry's participation in major and minor skirmishes. Under favorable circumstances it goes well, but as soon as the cavalry is exposed to machine-gun fire, the result is predictable and fatal.

As far as is known, there was no confrontation between the German 1st Cavalry Brigade and Polish cavalry units; nor with Russian cavalry units.

The myth is expanded

The "picturesque" in the situations is of course picked up by German propaganda and, among other things, in the film *Kampfgeschwader Lützow*, from 1941, scenes are shown where Polish cavalry with drawn sabers attack German armored vehicles. This propaganda film is about the fighting in Poland and - judging by the reviews of the film I've read - should not leave moviegoers in doubt as to who were the good guys and who were the bad guys.

go from where!

Furthermore, it is rumored - the source is my father - that also a weekly review from UFA, which was shown, among other things, in the then existing DSB Kino at Copenhagen Central Station, contained a dramatic depiction of a Polish cavalry attack against German armor. However, it cannot be determined whether these are other recordings or re-use of scenes from Kampfgeschwader Lützow.

Sources

1. *The Cavalry of World War II* by Janusz Piekalkiewicz, Orbis Publishing Limited, London 1979, ISBN 0-85613-022-2.

2nd *Combat Squadron Lützow* <http://people.freenet.de/Transsylvania/Dimension8.html>.

As a curiosity, it can be mentioned that the airplanes that in this film do it for Polish PZL-11 fighters are German training planes of Czech origin (Avia B-534)

http://www.dalnet.se/~surfcity/avia_germany.htm. Machines of this type were tested for a role as aircraft carrier-based fighters on the planned German aircraft carrier Deutschland.

Even before the ship project was stopped, the aircraft type had proven unsuitable for the purpose.

Comment on the cover image

This dramatic drawing comes from an Italian "weekly". Judging by the text on the back, the magazine is from around 1960.

Even with its many faults in, among other things, uniforming, the drawing has the quality that it brilliantly illustrates the myth of the Polish horseman's hopeless fight against German armour.

Closing

My father - Egon Chr. Finsted - handed me a few weeks ago a yellowed photocopy of an article from the American magazine *Army* and the cover photo that a friendly member of the Chakoten gave him many years ago.

Originally, it had been his plan to edit the article himself, but now I could see if I wanted to get something out of it... For me, it became the direct occasion to pick up on a topic that has interested me for a number of years - probably since I read the article about the last great attack of the Polish cavalry in the early 1970s. Thanks for the challenge! My mother - Ester Finsted - also became involved in the case.

Thanks for the proofreading!

Actually, it was my intention to publish the papers on September 10, 2002, the 63rd anniversary of the Polish cavalry's last major attack, but among other things, map studies delayed the work.

Last but not least, a thank you to Søren Juul for his never-failing help with my wishes about scanning - it's good to have a good friend to solve difficult tasks! Finally, a thank you to Kaare Myltoft - on the expected subsequent grant - as I hope that he will publish the papers on Chakoten's website; it's almost like having your own "press agency"!

But does the myth hold up at all, you have to ask yourself? Like many other myths, there is also an element of truth in this one. But from what I have been able to read, it is hardly as stereotyped as it was produced from the German side.

Per Finsted