

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Student Theses

Baruch College

---

1-1-1996

### The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 : why did it fail

Martin Stankiewicz

*Baruch College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb\\_etds/57](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb_etds/57)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

# THE WARSAW UPRISING OF 1944. WHY DID IT FAIL?

by  
**Martin Stankiewicz ©**

Submitted to the Committee on Undergraduate Honors at Baruch College of the City University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History with Honors.

---

Submitted on  
December, 1996

---

The Warsaw Uprising is a story of several thousand Poles who, once again, refused to accept the fate of Poland under occupation. It was ultimately their first and last military effort for independence.<sup>(1)</sup> Those who have studied the factors surrounding the Uprising of 1944 have established their own theories explaining the occurrence. Joanna Hanson, who wrote *The Civilian Population and the Warsaw Uprising*, says that the rising was bound to occur as a result of living conditions. Norman Davies, who has written *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, says that the Warsaw Uprising was heroic but a mistake; that it was premature. Some, on the other hand, claim that the Poles would have won if they were provided with Allied reinforcements and that the uprising was not only heroic but also reasonable and sustainable. Zawodny, who has written *Nothing but Honour: The Story of the Warsaw Uprising*, a comprehensive study on the subject, strongly believes this. In the years following the war many historians tried to analyze what happened in Warsaw and why, yet none of them seem to agree. Each one comes to their own conclusion. None able to agree on one analysis of the interpretation. In order to understand the uprising one must first know the events that led up to it.

Poland had been struggling for independence for hundreds of years. Moreover, because of Poland's geographical location it is in my opinion that Poland will be defending her boundaries indefinitely. The country, located between two rival greatpowers Germany and Russia - was in the last century considered to be a buffer state. In the 18th century it had been a battleground for Russia, Prussia and Austria who took advantage of its weaknesses and divided the territory through three partitions. Yet, during its time of sorrow the Poles had organized themselves and raised their arms fighting heroically,

often empty handed. It was this heroism in the time of need that allowed Poland to stay on the map for the century. On November 11, 1918, Poland once again became autonomous. Unfortunately, the times of bliss did not last very long. Twenty years later, Poland was invaded by Germany and, while fighting on the western front, seventeen days into the battle, the country was stabbed in tile back by the other powerful neighbor. On September 17, 1939 Poland was on the way to its fourth partition.

World War II began on September 1, 1939 at approximately 4:40 am. First, a German battleship, the Schleswig Holstein, stationed in the Danzig port on a friendly visit, began firing on a Polish fort. Then, one hour later, the Wehrmacht entered Poland by land and air from the west. On September 17, while the Polish Army was still fighting, the Soviet Army entered Poland from the east, claiming that Poland was defeated and it was Russian responsibility to defend Lithuania and the Soviet Union from tile German onslaught.

The desperate battle for Poland at the outbreak of World War II did not last long. The Polish Army was crushed in the last days of September and the beginning of October in 1939. After the defeat of the Polish Army, underground resistance flourished.<sup>(2)</sup> It became stronger as the German forces were placed under increasing pressure by the advancing Soviets during the summer of 1943. The objective, after the Soviet Union became an ally in the war, was to systematically re-establish self government that was lost in the September 1939 campaign.

Small military offensives were sparked by optimism and heightened morale among the Polish resistance as well as by the pressure on the resistance by the civilian population. Weapons and ammunition were stored in basements and surrounding forests. This activity was closely monitored by the Polish Government in Exile in London. The Poles sabotaged the Germans numerous times, but it was not until the summer of 1944, that the Polish underground army made a full scale effort to regain control of their capital.

The largest and primary resistance movement in Poland during the latter part of World War II was organized by the Armia Krajowa (AK), also known as the Polish Home Army. Most of these fighters were officers and soldiers from the old Polish Army which was defeated at the end of September 1939. In addition to the old file and rank, many Polish citizens decided to join the resistance. Men between the ages of 16 through 60 years of age participated in actual combat and sabotage activities. Furthermore, those who were too young to fight or were handicapped participated in other ways than combat. For example, children, both boys and girls, would deliver the mail to civilians or act as secret couriers between military headquarters and the combatants. Those men and women who worked in German factories would steal supplies and equipment which was used to make grenades. According

to Tuvia Borzykowski, who participated in both the Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, ... the civilian population became intensely involved, In every part of the city taken over by the insurgents the houses were decorated with Polish flags and civilians walked the streets with radiant faces, encouraging the fighters. Old and young were out in the streets heedless of bullets, enjoying the sight of the flags and the green uniforms of Polish soldiers. Women came out of their houses carrying food and drink for the fighting men, Young women became nurses, endangering their lives on the barricades. Even children became involved. 11 and 12 year olds acted as messengers and distributors of underground newspapers.(3)

The AK was formed from various political and ethnic groups. Many Jews collaborated with the AK. In 1942 the Poles established the Council of Assistance for Jews (RPZ) which saved approximately 100,00 Jews from the German death machine.(4) The Jews had lost much of their population to concentration camps in the previous years of the war and the Ghetto Uprising of 1943, but, nevertheless, the Jewish people who remained free did not give up hope and fought along side the poles.(5) Borzykowski who fought in the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Old City said in his memoirs, "The chief command of the People's Army cordially welcomed the founding of a Jewish fighting unit and we were immediately granted all privileges such as quarters, food rations etc."(6)

In 1942 the AK was joined by the Peasant Battalion (Bch) originally established to oppose the deportation and pacification program lead by Germany. In the summer of 1944 two additional right-wing groups joined the Home Army. They included the National Armed Forces (NSZ) and the National Military Organization (NOW). When referring to the AK during the Warsaw Uprising one is really referring to all of these groups fighting under one coherent command. Combined, they formed the single largest resistance group in Europe at the time - approximately 400,000 participant.(7)

The conditions of the civilian population was one factor which pressured the resistance groups to act. Ever since the 1939 occupation of Poland by Germany, living conditions for the Poles drastically declined. The German Governor, Ludwig Fischer, implemented what many Poles called a reign of terror. There was to be no display of Polish culture; Polish schools were closed. Children had to be sent to German controlled schools where many were taught from books on nature as opposed to history, Polish language or culture. Many parents refused to send their children to school as a result. Polish books, dictionaries, newspapers, flags and maps were burned, and libraries closed. Theaters catered to German citizens. The repertory of those that admitted Poles was filled with German propaganda.(8)

Working conditions for Poles were devastating. Poles were hired as factory workers but were not allowed to hold any managerial positions. Their pay was close to nothing --- approximately six - ten zloty a day for a factory job during a time when feeding a family of four cost 1,568 zloty a month.(9) Many Poles did not work at all. As the war progresses money lost its value. Miron Bialoszewski who was in Warsaw during the war and the Uprising said, "Bartering sprang up ... From day to day ... a huge crowd. Standing. Milling about ... Practically everyone held something in his hand. Anything. Anything could be exchanged, as long as it wasn't for money. Money was worth as much as garbage."(10) There was a shortage of housing. Many buildings were destroyed during the German bombardment in 1939. If housing was available, several families had to share living quarters. Two to four families would live in one room. It was even worse during winter. The bombing raids had knocked out most of the windows, There was no heating when the temperature in January of 1940 fluctuated between -20' and -30' Celsius. Families would create a campfire in a single room from furniture they found in abandoned buildings. Others would live in crowded cellars under the city where it was safe from the bombing raids.(11)

Food supplies were rationed. Poles in Warsaw were allowed approximately half of a portion of bread that a German citizen was. Four hundred grams of meat was allowed for the Pole when a German was provided with 4,000 grams. Beer, wine, cigarettes, and cheese were denied completely. While food was sold on the black market, prices were high. In addition, any German raid which resulted in food confiscation raised the price as much as 50%. None-the-less the black market bridged the gap between death and survival.(12) Furthermore, clothing was too expensive to buy. A pair of shoes in 1941 cost 600 - 700 Zloty. In 1942 only 100,000 pairs of shoes were offered for sale for a population of over one million people living in Warsaw.(13)

The Soviets also established various political groups within Poland. These were not formed as military resistance groups. Russia already had their own military and a Polish Army under Soviet command. There also existed a Polish Communist military group within Warsaw which was not under the direct control of the Soviets. They were called the Armia Ludowa (AL) or the Peoples Army with approximately 10,000 participants. This group hoped to assist the Red Army as they entered Warsaw. This group was much smaller and less influential than the AK Ultimately they joined with the AK in the uprising against the Germans. The communist Polska Partia Robotnicza (PPR) also known as the Polish Worker's Party was organized in 1942 with the aid of Russia although there already existed a communist party in Poland before the war. The Zwiasek Patriotow Polskich (ZPP), also known as the Union of Polish Patriots, was established in 1943. This party was established in Russia and served to organize and unite the Poles within Russia as a military and political group, after Stalin announced in 1943 that

anyone in Russia in November 1939 was regarded as a citizen of Russia. Willie before the war the communists were a minority group within Poland, after the war this party served as the puppet government. Finally, after the Uprising broke out, on July 22, 1944 the Soviets established the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) to administer the liberated territories of Poland.(14)

The Committee of National Liberation was probably the most influential of all communist parties at the time. They claimed to be the legal government of Poland at the end of World War II and, after the war, helped establish the puppet communist government within Poland until it fell apart in the 1980's.

Gabriel Kolko, a historian, who had written Century of War believes that Polish resistance during World War I as enigmatic; that the underground was a substitute for Polish society and that most joined this underground to survive rather than resist.(15) Perhaps it is true that the underground was Polish society at the time but it is incorrect to say that it was a substitute. After all everything about the underground was Polish, including the majority of the people, the language, culture, and food. It would be more appropriate to refer to the Germans who occupied Poland as a substitute Polish society. After all they came, by force, to replace the existing society within Poland - to substitute for that society. Because the Germans were unsuccessful at replacing the Poles, the underground at the time was the true Polish society.

Furthermore, when an individual or a force uses violence against an enemy and that violence is justified and supported by the United States, England, and Russia, one ought not call it survival but resistance. Stealing food and clothing from tile Germans may be survival but in the larger picture, the combined events which transpired between August 1, 1944 and October 2, 1944 was a full fledged uprising - a resistance movement as opposed to survival.

The Warsaw Uprising was the ultimate result of a military operation code named "Burza," also known as the "Tempest." Originally it was implemented as a strategy to liberate Eastern Poland by fighting the Germans in the rural areas. The plan was to move westward and fight the German rear-guard as the Soviets pressured them to withdraw. As the Soviets arrived the AK was to cease fighting. The goal here was to successfully drive the Germans out and assume political control city by city. In order to gain an upper hand politically the Polish AK needed to participate by fighting the Germans before the Red Army could assume control. Operation "Tempest" was, therefore, "directed militarily against tile Germans and politically against the Russians."(16)

The military resistance against the Germans was clear. They had violated Polish sovereignty and occupied Poland. As a result Polish resistance was aimed at driving them out. It was an act of self defense which was justified by German hostility and treatment of the Polish population. The AK

The political offensive against Russia was of equal importance to the Poles, yet it was staged at a different level. Both Poland and Russia had their differences and knew that having a common enemy did not guarantee a relationship. On the contrary, Poland was distrustful of Russia and the Russians of those Poles who had any responsibility during the war. They were attacked by the Soviets at the outbreak of World War II. Secondly they witnessed Stalin's brutality in the Katyn forest massacre in April 1943, where 4,321 Polish officers were found dead on land which was, at that time, occupied by Russia. Each of these officers was found with their hands tied behind their back and shot in the back of the head, execution style. Furthermore, 11,000 additional officers were missing, never to be found again. Likewise the Russians were distrustful of the Poles. They considered Poland "the monstrous bastard of the peace of Versailles," as Molotov had once said. Stalin referred to Poland as "Pardon the expression, a state." The hostility between these two states existed for over 500 years and sure enough it was not about to end now. As a result the negligent and hostile behavior of the Russians frightened many Polish leaders. There was the constant fear that the Soviets might want to set up Poland as a puppet communist state. There was a further question of Lithuanian territories and to whom they actually belonged. This was enough to convince the Polish resistance to gain political control over individual cities before the Soviets were able to implement Russian political control.

The Tempest was executed with mixed results. The Polish Home Army often fought the Germans, driving them further west. Sometimes they fought alongside the Red Army only to be ambushed by them after providing assistance. Each time the AK would occupy a town or city, the Red Army would arrive and replace the AK command with Polish communists loyal to the Soviets. The Red Army, after receiving military help from the Poles, would round up the insurgents and place them under arrest. Some of those arrested would then be sent to the Soviet Union, others would be shot. Furthermore, if Poland refused to fight alongside the Red Army then Russia had a pretext to execute the Polish leaders - Poland was not fighting because it was pro-German. This would give Stalin a reason to take Poland without threatening allied relations. Moreover, it turns out that the AK fought for Eastern Poland unaware that the eastern territories were already ceded to Russia. On December 1, 1943, at the Teheran Conference, Eastern Poland was taken by the Russians in an agreement between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt.<sup>(17)</sup> Yet, the British insisted that there should be a mutual understanding between the Poles and Russians.

Although many claim that the Conference at Teheran was a secret and that the result was a great shock and a stab in the back, I tend to disagree. The Tehran Conference was not a secret to the diplomats from the Polish Government in Exile. It was only a secret to the general public and Warsaw headquarters. Prime Minister of Poland, Mikolajczyk, was aware of the meeting and he explained to British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, Poland's position regarding frontiers. He was aware that Russia claimed the eastern territories of Poland, including Lithuania. Furthermore, Mikolajczyk was aware of the concessions he had to make in eastern Poland for the sake of Russo-Polish relations. Certainly he would have preferred if the borders remained as they had been before the war in 1939. He told Eden that any discussions of Polish frontiers should include Poland's claim to the West, including rich German territory. Eden asked Mikolajczyk if he may address Poland's frontier problems at Tehran. Mikolajczyk agreed. Roosevelt, on the other hand, was not concerned so much with the frontier problem of Poland as he was about Russo-Polish relations. His elections were approaching and he did not want to lose Polish votes. He was therefore willing to compromise Poland's eastern frontier considering approximately an equal amount of land was gained in the west. In fact, during the conference Roosevelt asked Stalin if Poland would be proportionally compensated in the west. Stalin answered that he did not know. Apparently Roosevelt was satisfied with this answer but he showed some concern for Poland.<sup>(18)</sup> Churchill, on the other hand, demanded a concrete answer. He insisted that Poland be compensated for the land it gave up. Furthermore, arrangements were made with Stalin to have the Polish population east of the Curzon line transferred within the Polish boundaries.<sup>(19)</sup>

At first Stalin wanted the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, which was the dividing line within Poland between Germany and Russia after Poland's defeat in 1939, to serve as the border between Poland and Russia. After realizing that it was impossible to compensate Poland under this proposal, Russia was persuaded to accept the Curzon Line, which was first proposed by the British in 1920 based on ethnic factors. The line was drawn to divide the Poles from the Lithuanians in response to the Russo-Polish dispute during the Bolshevik Revolution. In return Poland received 150 miles of German territory in the west, Eastern Prussia and the territories of Upper Silesia. When Mikolajczyk learned of the agreement he expressed his opposition. But the disagreement did not revolve around all of the ceded territories. In fact, Mikolajczyk was willing to make amends to the boundaries. The disagreement was regarding two important cities with large Polish populations on the border of the Curzon line, these were Lwow and Wilno. Under the agreement they would be ceded to Russia. When his request for the two cities was refused he asked for additional land from Germany but this request was also denied. It was consequently settled at the frontiers originally agreed upon at the Tehran Conference. Under this agreement Poland was not compensated proportionally. The territory that it lost to Russia amounted to 178,220 km<sup>2</sup>

and it gained 101,200 km<sup>2</sup>, but the gains were far superior to the losses. The German and Prussian territories were rich in coal and iron deposits while Lithuanian land was used as farmland and held no substantial resources. Not only did this benefit the Poles but the plan would also deprive Germany of valuable industrial resources for the future of the German military after the war.

Despite the disagreement, the headquarters in Warsaw were not notified of the border arrangements and as a consequence did not tailor their military plans to the change in territory. As a result many insurgents were left fighting the Germans on Russian land. Unfortunately, at that time the Soviets did not recognize the AK as a combatant group and did not treat them as prisoners of war. Instead many insurgent soldiers caught fighting the Germans on Russian land were shot. Consequently, the relations between the Soviet military and the Polish Home Army may have been strained as a result of Mikolajczyk's negligence to inform the insurgents of border changes. It was, after all, his responsibility to inform the insurgents of any diplomatic decisions which might affect their fighting. Unfortunately, Mikolajczyk gave everyone the impression that relations were progressing. In fact after a conference on August 3, 1944, between Mikolajczyk and Molotov, the New York Times declared that "cooperation [between Poland and Russia] so far is 'quite satisfactory.'"<sup>(20)</sup> In my opinion Tempest should have ceased in the annexed territories until further negotiations were settled. This would have saved many lives and possibly strengthened relations between Polish and Soviet troops.

Although operation Tempest was designed to take place in the rural parts of Poland, and preparations reflected this goal, the evolving events pressed for military action in the city of Warsaw. On July 21, 1944, the Commander of the AK, General Bor-Komorowski met with his chief of Staff, Brigadier General Tadeusz Pelczynski and his second in command, General Leopold Okulicki. They came to a conclusion that the time had come to rise against the Germans who at that time were apparently removing their forces from Warsaw in the face of the oncoming Russian Army. Stanislaw Jankowski, Delegate and Vice-Prime Minister of the legal Polish Government who was, at the time, the senior authority in Warsaw, gave his approval.<sup>(21)</sup>

Observing the many wounded and dead German soldiers being evacuated from the city it was expected that the Red Army will take over within days. But because the Polish leaders wanted to show to the west that it was through their efforts and not the Russian's that Warsaw was liberated, they felt obliged to act immediately. On July 25 General Bor reported to London that the AK stood by ready to pick up their weapons. That same day the Government in Exile authorized Jankowski to make any decisions necessitated by the speed of the Soviet offensive, without any further communication with London. Prime Minister Mikolajczyk made this

decision concrete by sending a telegram on July 26 to the delegate which authorized him to "announce the beginning of the uprising at the moment chosen by you." The Prime Minister, who was just getting ready to go to Moscow to discuss with Stalin the matters of the border and the future shape of Poland, wanted to have a strong argument - the military uprising for independence - to reinforce his position.(22)

The following day, Ambassador to Great Britain Edward Raczynski paid a visit to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and informed him about the plans for the uprising. He suggested that a brigade of paratroopers be sent to Warsaw, that the German Royal Air Force around Warsaw be bombed, that long-range fighter planes be given to the disposition of the AK, and lastly that it be announced that the AK holds combatant rights. Eden promised to consider these ideas. Shortly after, Raczynski received a letter from Sir Orme Sargent of the British Foreign Office stating that Britain lacked the technical capabilities to assist Poland and "therefore, there is nothing that His Majesty's Government can do in this connexion..."(23) Meanwhile, a Polish paratroops brigade stood by ready to go to Warsaw. Again England refused to transport them because according to British Field Marshall Alan F. Brooke, "Large numbers of transport aircraft would be required for this purpose, and these could not be spared at this critical stage of the campaign in the west ."(24) While the Polish paratroops brigade refused to eat in protest, no one troubled to inform General Bor, even after the rising began, that assistance was not coming. It seems that vital information was withheld often from the AK Not only was the Home Army already fighting on Soviet land without knowing it, now they were about to engage in a full scale uprising under the impression that aid was on its way. With the proper information the AK command could have conformed their decisions regarding the time and place of the uprising.

The fact that they did not receive combatant rights did not impede their resistance efforts. Combatant rights would not have led to victory. But it did mean that many insurgent lives were lost unnecessarily as a result. The allies, when making the decision not to grant combatant rights, may have thought that a combined and coordinated effort among the Poles and Russians would have meant an easier victory. This was, in fact, what England wanted - cooperation among the two. The mentality of the Polish and Russian governments, and the fact that each had conflicting national interests, did not allow for a close relationship. While combatant rights would have forced the enemy to take prisoners, refusing combatant rights resulted in the execution of many armed Poles within and outside of Warsaw. It was not until August 2, 1944 after the uprising had begun, that England announced that the insurgents had combatant rights. This was in response to the Germans who were using Polish prisoners and civilians as shields in front of their tanks and infantry.(25) Regardless, the Germans did not follow the rules of war and continued to shield their military with Polish

civilians and insurgents. It was not until October 2, 1944 that Poles were granted combatant rights by Germany, and this was conditional on the surrender of the AK.

The decision for the uprising was maturing in the midst a lot of tension. The leadership of underground Poland knew that a premature Uprising would allow the Germans to crush it while a late one would deprive the legal government in London of influence over the course of action.

One incident which precipitated the uprising was the Communist call for arms. Just before the uprising Communist radio made several broadcasts. On April 29, the Moscow Radio in a Polish edition called for Poles to "Raise up arms! There is no time to be lost." The following day another message was transmitted. It said "Let the millions of Warsawians become a million soldiers who will force away the German occupant and win their liberty." On July 30, the Polish Workers' Party spread this propaganda, "Warsowians, raise up arms. Alert the whole city and every neighborhood. Raise up militarily."<sup>(26)</sup> These messages and others were transmitted over five times a day just prior to the Rising. The Communist PPR also tried to stir tensions by announcing that the leadership of the AK ran away from Warsaw, when in fact they remained in the city. Communist propaganda also called for the Polish people to assist the PPR in their rising against the Germans. This proclamation was written all over the walls of Warsaw and may have prematurely alerted the Germans of the uprising.<sup>(27)</sup> In a situation where a large proportion of the inhabitants of the capital were eager to fight there existed a danger that the spontaneous military operation of the communists would create an uprising under their leadership. This was additional pressure for the AK command.

The Germans wanted to avoid an uprising, but their methods of trying to silence the possible insurgents placed the AK under a lot of tension. The Germans, who already knew that an uprising was to take place as early as the 25th of July, began to take precautions and doubled their patrols. Night curfews were more stringently enforced. It was common for German patrols to round up the men, shoot them on the spot or possibly deport them to concentration camps. Furthermore, the Germans hung posters around the city asking for one hundred thousand able bodied men for labor putting up fortifications against the advancing Red Army. The Germans were unsuccessful at gathering these men. These able bodied men were apparently more willing to fight against the Germans than help them. Possibly many of them knew that it was just an easy way to gather and detain the Polish people who were of age and physical strength to fight. In addition, the AK was afraid that the Germans would uncover their weapon caches which were being prepared in the basements of ruined buildings.

This fear was perpetuated when German officials uncovered 70,000 grenades and 450 flame throwers that were to be used by the insurgents hidden in basements of abandoned buildings.(28) The basements were then flooded and many men died. The AK feared that the Germans might uncover more of their weapons, and they had very few to spare. Lastly, the AK command was informed on July 30 that four German tank divisions were approaching Warsaw. These were to be used against the advancing Red Army and could have easily been used against the insurgents.(29) This constant pressure called for an uprising to be staged as soon as possible.

In the morning of July 30 the chief commander of the AK, General Bor, met with the Rada Jednosci Narodowej (RJN) also known as the Committee for National Unity which wanted to join in an alliance with Britain, France and the United States. This committee was made up of civilians and was separate from the AK but it cooperated with the Home Army. It was responsible for the consolidation of the civilian side of the Polish Underground, the distribution of food and clothing, and in charge of maintaining some sort of order within the city. The Committee also wanted to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union as long as the Soviets did not interfere with the internal affairs of Poland. In addition, they wanted to establish a centralized constitutional democracy, an apolitical army and equal rights for minorities. At the meeting General Bor related that the Red Army was spotted in Grochow, a suburb of Warsaw. That same day, at six o'clock in the afternoon, Colonel Monter-Chrusciel reported that Russian tanks were spotted in Praga, another suburb of Warsaw. A courier who was in Warsaw at this time reported that "the speed of the Russian advance had caused the Germans to hasten their slaughter of Hungarian Jews and Poles," which was yet another factor which precipitated the uprising.(30) It was then decided that the Warsaw Uprising would start on August 1 at five o'clock in the afternoon, also known as "W" hour.(31)

On August 1, 1944 at five o'clock in the afternoon, in the streets of Warsaw, the AK began an Uprising against the German occupants. The battle lasted for sixty three days. During these sixty three days Warsaw was destroyed systematically while the inhabitants were murdered one by one. Fires and explosions were everywhere. "The thick clouds of smoke were over the capital as if they wanted to cover up the inequality of the fighting underneath."(32) The AK had few guns and little ammunition. The citizens living without water, gas and electricity, feeding upon rotten wheat, also stood up to the Germans. With their empty hands young men, women and children rose against tanks and guns, Their motto was "Whoever wins will be free, whoever dies is free already."(33) After sixty three days Warsaw fell.

In the Warsaw Uprising over 200,000 people were killed and thousands more removed to German concentration camps during their fight for

freedom. Those who survived had nothing left. Their city was turned into ruins.

Many will say that the Warsaw Uprising was premature and that is why it failed. This is inaccurate. The uprising was not premature. The approaching Red Army signified hope for the Warsawians. Fighting in the rear ranks of the retreating German Army meant an easier victory than fighting them directly during the occupation. The unbearable living conditions and constant oppression by German officials placed the civilian population pleading and demanding help from the AK and the Polish government. All of these factors preceding the uprising are clear examples that the uprising was bound to occur. Others say that the uprising was premature because the insurgents were ill equipped and did not possess a strict chain of command which meant that it was difficult to coordinate the resistance effort. This is true; the AK was organized from separate insurgent groups fighting under the title of AK, and they were not equipped to take on the Germans alone, but at the time of the uprising, the AK had more weapons and ammunition than it ever had at any time during the war. In addition at the time of the uprising the AK was as well unified as it ever was. It contained one of the largest unified resistance groups in Europe. Furthermore, the New York Times on August 3, 1944 wrote that, "Warsaw and even Germans themselves do not believe liberation is far off."<sup>(34)</sup> The AK could not wait any longer. Waiting would not bring them more weapons nor any more soldiers. In fact their numbers were ever so slowly diminishing due to the German executions and concentration camps. In addition, their weapon and ammunition garrisons were under the threat of discovery. Waiting was nothing more than passively accepting one's own death. The uprising was bound to occur. Its failure is attributed to several different reasons.

To begin with, the AK was anticipating a quick victory unaware of the full strength of the Germans in Warsaw. The AK was severely deficient in equipment and tactics compared to the Germans. The AK possessed only those weapons they had saved from the 1939 defeat, those weapons which they stole and those which they bought from avaricious Germans.<sup>(35)</sup> A large portion of their weapons was stored outside of Warsaw to be used in other parts of Poland. These weapons would never reach Warsaw after the Uprising began because it was almost impossible to cross the Wisla in large numbers without being seen. According to several members of the AK Headquarters the available equipment consisted of the following:

- 1,000 carbines
- 300 pistols
- 60 light machine guns
- 7 heavy machine guns
- 35 special carbines and bazookas

1,700 revolvers  
25,000 hand-grenades

The number of soldiers actually fighting for the AK within Warsaw was estimated between 36,000 and 40,000 which would allow approximately 10 percent of the force to be armed at one time. The need for ammunition was even more desperate. On August 1, 1944 the following was available:

35 bullets to a pistol  
300 bullets for a machine pistol  
50 shells for anti-armour cannon (but not even one cannon)  
190 pieces of ammunition per carbine  
500 rounds of ammunition for a light machine gun  
2,300 rounds for the heavy machine guns(36)

Due to this scarcity every piece of ammunition was cherished dearly. A poster circulated among the Polish resistance fighters, illustrated a skeleton wearing a German helmet. Underneath it read "For every German, one bullet." These posters were intended to be taken seriously. Wasting ammunition would have meant punishment and possible confiscation of the weapon and ammunition. To save ammunition, bricks were dropped onto patrolling SS men, and stones were used to bludgeon any German who was unfortunate enough to be caught with his guard down. Hand-made grenades, constructed of nuts and bolts wrapped in socks were used, but were often too bulky to throw. Cocktail bombs were also used when hand-grenades ran out. Their ingenuity was boundless; unfortunately they needed more than just creativity and strong will to win a battle. They needed weapons and ammunition that would match those of the Germans. One just can not fight a tank with sticks and stones, as some people did. Overall the insurgents had enough ammunition to last for only three days. The New York Times on August 4, 1944 claimed that "the underground forces could not reduce the German fortifications because of the scarcity of weapons, especially heavy ones."(37) Ninety percent of the soldiers were therefore treated as reserves.

The insurgents were also deficient tactically. Because of the difficulty with communication, it was hard to coordinate the whole effort. In fact, due to misunderstanding, deep enthusiasm and insufficient lines of communication (meaning the sewers), some insurgents began firing on the Germans as early as 1:30 in the afternoon on August 1, 1944. During the first few days of the fighting the AK was fighting in groups that were too small to take any important German strongpoints. By the time the AK had realized their errors, the Germans were able to coordinate their efforts toward fortifying strategic points such as bridges and airports. Instead of focusing their efforts on such strongpoints the forces were scattered around the city and much of their energy went into fighting for each and every building and block regardless of importance. It seems that they focused too much on fighting

the individual soldier when they should have been taking bridges, prisons, and important fortifications.(38) Another error may have been the reluctance to retreat. General Monter, who personally commanded the forces in the city of Warsaw, ordered that no man shall retreat even when the odds are greatly against them. I am sure that each man was willing to fight to the end, but I am not sure whether this is the right attitude to have when you have no weapons and you are outnumbered. General Monter was stubborn when it came to retreating and often General Bor himself had to order Monter to withdraw. This reluctance may have cost the AK many unnecessary casualties.

As I have already mentioned the British failed to provide military assistance to the AK, but they did attempt to provide air assistance by dropping supplies. Supplies were sent by British aircraft which took off from Britain, Italy and Africa. Both Polish and British airmen volunteered for these missions. While their efforts should be seen as heroic, the resistance that they faced prevented any meaningful assistance to reach the insurgents. Many British pilots who flew over Warsaw were hesitant to go back complaining bitterly, "that Russians were actually firing on them."(39) They claimed that the barrage of artillery was coming from both the German and Russian sides of the front. Of course, in addition to them having to dodge friendly fire, the pilots had to avoid being shot down by the Germans. German artillery and guns showered any enemy planes that penetrated Warsaw airspace. German fighter planes threatened any bomber squadrons or supply planes which dared enter without air support. It was estimated that approximately sixty percent of the aircraft sent to Warsaw did not return, while flights to other German occupied countries had no losses. Planes that did return were full of bullet holes. "Even parachutes inside the planes were riddled by German bullets or explosives."(40) The alternative was to land planes on Soviet occupied territory after making the airdrops which would allow for short range fighters to assist the supply missions. Unfortunately, Stalin forbade any allied planes from landing on Soviet soil and refused to make any air drops. Of the very few supplies that made it to Warsaw, 90 percent of them fell into German hands. After one and a half months of fighting, and a lot of pressure from the allied forces and growing publicity, the Soviets reluctantly agreed to make air drops into Warsaw. I do not suppose the Russians were too helpful when they decided to make the air drops but on September 14, when Russian planes suddenly appeared over Warsaw with them came a hail of crashing containers. Their parachutes failed to open.(41) The insufficient air support was, therefore, another reason why the Uprising failed.

Some claim that the English were responsible for providing the Poles with military assistance in the event of an invasion as was stipulated in the Versailles Treaty. They did just that in 1939 when Poland was invaded by Germany. The conditions were different in 1944 when the Poles decided to

stage an uprising. First of all, Poland was not invaded in 1944, it was already occupied by the Germans. Technically, Poland did not exist. Certainly Russians were "opposed to the Polish London Government which is acknowledged by the underground." Secondly, the British did attempt to provide aid to those insurgents who remained united under the AK by dropping supplies whenever it was possible. Unfortunately it was not enough to fulfill the insurgent's needs. The fact that they did not allow the Polish paratroops brigade to invade Warsaw might have meant that England was concerned about the lives of those troops. After all, if an airplane dropping supplies returns riddled with bullets, what are the chances of several thousand soldiers trying to jump out of these planes into streams of artillery fire? They would be sitting ducks. Their chances of making it may have been minimal if any. Lastly, I believe the allied western front was a reasonable attempt at providing aid to the Poles. The purpose was to defeat Germany as a whole and provide independence to France, Belgium, Poland, among a few nations occupied by Germany, not just to liberate the Warsawians from German occupation.

Finally, many Poles blame the failure of the uprising on the Russians. After the Tehran Conference Russo-Polish relations were believed to be improved. The AK on the eve of the uprising was aware that the Soviet Army was approaching Warsaw. They expected them to enter anywhere between August 1st and August 4th. Unfortunately, the Soviets did not enter Warsaw until January 1945, five months later.

Many Polish historians say that the Russians purposely waited until the AK was suppressed so that they would be able to enter and take Warsaw for themselves. While the Soviets probably did want to take Warsaw, this was a secondary objective. Their first objective was to drive the Germans as far west as possible and occupy as much Polish and German territory as they could in a short period of time. Therefore, it was an inconvenience for them to stop at the outskirts of Warsaw to wait for three months if they were physically able to advance.

The Russians claim that they were stopped by the German Army. By the time the Russians reached Warsaw the Germans had sent four extra tank divisions to stop the advancing Russians. General Heinz Guderian stated, "We Germans had the impression that it was our defenses that halted the enemy rather than a Russian desire to sabotage the Warsaw Uprising."<sup>(42)</sup> It was the perception of the Russians that a military halt would allow the United States and England to seize the bulk of German territory. The Soviet gains would then depend upon the location of the Russian Army at the end of the war.

The Warsaw Uprising fell short of its goal. But the blame can not be focused on any one nation or group of people. The blame falls on everyone.

Roosevelt could have taken more time and influence to negotiate the future boundaries of Poland instead of depending on the UN to settle the Polish question. The English, who would not take a stand on most issues without the approval of the United States, could have taken a firmer stand against Russian Diplomacy. The Polish government in London also failed to provide the AK with pertinent information. Because the main concern was weapons, ammunition and possibly ground support the Soviets would not have provided these due to their objective to take Warsaw. They opposed the Polish government in exile and they wanted to occupy as much territory as possible. They could not have accomplished this if they collaborated with the AK. It was foolish to think that the Soviets would have provided the Poles with guns and ammunition which later could have been used against them. This is one reason why the Russians failed to recognize the AK as a combatant group. Independent national interest ultimately led to the failure of the Warsaw Uprising.

Moreover, I believe the Uprising was worthwhile, no matter that it failed. Unfortunately many people died during this rising, but many people would have died without the uprising. Some may ask, why not wait for the Soviets to liberate Poland? The answer is simple. Russia invaded Poland in 1939. They were hostile to them throughout the war killing tens of thousands of Polish officers. Only when Germany attacked Russia in 1941 did the Soviets look at Poland as an ally. After Germany was no longer a threat to Russia, Stalin once again began eliminating Polish resistance. The question should be why was the Polish government so naive as to depend so much on Stalin's Army? Under Soviet liberation Poland was allowed to keep its name but its soul was stolen from them.

The Uprising was worthwhile because it established Polish identity in a time when Poland was practically wiped off the map. Peaceful negotiations obviously did not accomplish the desired results, Resistance was the only option opened to the Poles. They wanted independence as they have always wanted it in the past and no one was able to give it to them or even help them achieve it. Poland gained its independence after World War I through the Treaty of Versailles. After World War II, Poland was not afforded this luxury. I believe the resistance movement and every other act of independence throughout history, on the part of the Polish nation is an example that Poland exists and will always exist in body, mind and spirit. And it is in my opinion that these acts of resistance led to the liberation of Poland in the 1980's.

---

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## **PRIMARY:**

Bialoszewski, Miron. *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*. Translated by Medeline Levine. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977.

Borzykowski, Tuvia. *Between Tumbling Walls*, 2d ed. Translated by Mendel Kohansky. Israel: Beit Lohamei Hagettaot, Ghetto Fighters' House and Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1976.

New York Times. 3 August - 22 October 1944.

Strzetelski, S. *Bitwa o Warsawie: Fauty i Dokumenty*. New York, 1945.

## **SECONDARY:**

Albert, A. *Najnowsza Najnowsza historia Polski 1918-1980*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman, 1991.

Bremont, Marshall. "Why didn't the Soviets take Warsaw?" *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*. (1994): 80 - 86.

Ciechanowski, Jan M. *The Warsaw Rising of 1944*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1974.

Davies, Norman. *God's Playground.- A History of Poland*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Deschner, G. *Warsaw Rising* New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.

Hanson, Joanna K. M. *The civilian population and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Kolko, Gabriel. *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914*. New York: The New Press. 1994.

Weinberg, G.L. *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Zawodny, J.K. *Nothing But Honour: the story of the Warsaw Uprising*. California: Hoover Institution Press, 1978.

---

## NOTES

- (1) Weinberg, G.L., *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 709-712.
- (2) Davies, N., *God's Playground.- A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 464.
- (3) Borzykowski, T., *Between Tumbling Walls*, 2d ed. Trans. Mendel Kohansky. (Israel: Beit Loliainei Hageittaot, Glietto Fighter's House and Hakibbutz Haineuchad Publishing House, 1976). 163.
- (4) Zawodny, J.K., *Nothing but Honour: The Story of the Warsaw Uprising* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 24.; Davies, 465
- (5) Davies, 466.
- (6) Borzykowski, 169.
- (7) Davies, 464-466
- (8) Hanson, Joanna, *The civilian Population and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 36-38.
- (9) Ibid., 22.
- (10) Bialoszcwski, M., *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*. Tr. Medline Levine. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 203.
- (11) Hanson, 23-26.; Bialoszewski, 57-58.
- (12) Hanson, 26-29
- (13) Ibid., 29-30.
- (14) Hanson, 52.
- (15) Kolko, G., *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 255.
- (16) Deschner, G., *Warsaw Rising* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 20.
- (17) Weinberg, 788
- (18) Ciechanowski Jan M., *The Warsaw Rising of 1944* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 15.

(19) *ibid.*, 13-17.

(20) "Molotov Talks with Mikolajczyk," *New York Times*, 3 August 1944

(21) Davies, 474

(22) Albert, A. *Najnowsza historia Polski 1918-1980* (Great Britain: Cox and Wyman, 1991), 440-442.

(23) Zawodny, J.K., 119.

(24) *Ibid.*, 119.

(25) "25,000 Poles Seize Warsaw's Old City," *New York Times*, 5 August 1944 4(A)

(26) Albert, A., 442.

(27) Zawodny, J.K., 40

(28) *Ibid.*, 3 1.

(29) Strzetelski, S, *Bitwa o Warszawę Factly I Dokumenty* (New York, 1945) 14-20.

(30) "Warsaw Districts held by Patriots," *New York Times*, 4 August 1944

(31) Albert, A., 440.

(32) Strzetelski, S., 3.

(33) *Ibid.*, 3

(34) Sydney Gruson, "Molotoff Talks with Mikolajczyk," *New York Times*, 3 August 1944; stationed in London.

(35) Sydney Gruson, "Partisans Claim much of Warsaw," *New York Times*, 6 August 1944

(36) Zawodny, J.K., 26.

(37) "Warsaw District held by Patriots," *New York Times*, 4 August 1944

(38) Zawodny, 16-17.

(39) *Ibid.*, 115.

(40) Ibid., 115.

(41) Ibid., 130.

(42) Marshall Brement, "*Why didn't the Soviets take Warsaw?*," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* (1994) : 85.

---

© Copyright to this work is retained by the author[s]. Permission is granted for the noncommercial reproduction of the complete work for educational or research purposes.